

**Doctorate in Educational, Child and Adolescent  
Psychology**

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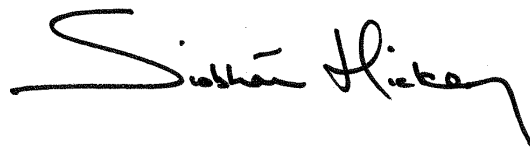
The Initial Experiences of Young People with Severe Learning  
Difficulties Transitioning from Post-16 School to a FE College

UCL, INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

## Declaration of Authorship

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I, Siobhan Hickey confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Siobhan Hickey". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'S'.

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**Dr Siobhán Hickey**

## ABSTRACT

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### Background

Obtaining and promoting the voice of the young person with learning difficulties features strongly in both English education policies and learning difficulty research (e.g. DfE, 2014; Loyd, 2012; Porter & Lacey, 2004). In particular, the views of young people are being encouraged at points of transition, such as the move from post-16 provision to further education (e.g. Heslop, Abbott, Johnson, & Mallet, 2007; Palikara, Lindsay, & Dockrell, 2009). The present study aimed to explore the views and experiences of young people with severe learning difficulties (SLD) on their initial transition to further education (FE). It also examined the challenging and supportive factors identified by the young people as being significant in their start at FE provision.

### Participants

Five young people, identified as having SLD in their statement of special educational needs (SEN) participated in the current study. All young people were attending the same FE college which had a specialist provision for students with SLD.

### Methods and Procedures

To promote the voice of each young person, an individual case study design was employed. The views of the young people were gathered using semi-structured interviews. Each young person was interviewed twice, at the beginning of the first college term and six weeks later.

### **Results**

All of the young people identified friendship at college as being a key experience and supportive factor for them. The young people also reported feeling positive about the learning and social opportunities available to them once they had started at college and two of the young people were particularly enthusiastic about opportunities for greater independence and autonomy. The young people identified significant factors in facilitating their transition, such as support from families (predominantly mothers) and college staff. Three young people experienced a sense of loss and missed their friends from school. Tiredness was also identified by four young people as a challenging factor to their experiences of college.

### **Conclusions**

The study demonstrated the ability of young people with SLD to express their views and experiences of starting college, including identifying the supportive and challenging factors they had encountered. The findings and their implications for the role of educational psychologists (EP) are considered in relation to promoting the young people's voice and also in supporting the transition of vulnerable populations to post-school provisions.



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## 1. INTRODUCTION

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This study aimed to explore the views of young people with severe learning difficulties (SLD) about the experience of transitioning from post-16 school provision to FE. The research questions addressed were:

1. How do young people with SLD experience their initial transition from post-16 school to FE?
2. What do the young people consider to be the supportive and challenging factors in their transition?

### 1.1 Rationale for my Study

The transition to FE is described as a significant period which moves the young person from childhood towards adulthood (Griffiths, 1994). Leaving school is cited as an important experience for all individuals. Mitchell (1999) reported that 94% of the special school leavers remained in some form of education, either full or part-time, after leaving school. Similarly, Heslop, Mallett, Simons and Ward (2002) discovered that 78% of young people with learning disabilities continued to FE as their first placement after school. Data from January 2015, suggested that 85% of young people, with a statement of special educational needs (SEN) were in FE (DfE, 2014). Data for young people with SLD however was not available. It appears that increasingly young people and their families the preferred destination after secondary school is FE (Carnaby, Lewis, Martin, Naylor, & Stewart, 2003). It is important therefore to describe the perspectives young people with SLD have developed about their transition to FE. To date, the



individual experience of transition to FE has not been fully explored with the young person with SLD. This study was both necessary and important in adding to the little research already undertaken in this field and also in promoting the voice of the SLD population.

The Educational Psychology Service (EPS) in the borough where I work was evaluating their service provision model and ways in which to provide psychological support to both the 19-25 population and FE provisions. The study therefore was of interest to the service and to the borough more generally, as they considered ways to adapt to the requirements set out in the SEND Code of Practice (DfE, 2014). The EPS was also eager to look at ways to elicit every young person's voice and were interested in the communication techniques being used to facilitate a conversation with a young person with SLD.

Educational Psychologists (EPs) have led the way in assessing children's perspectives (Gersch, 1996). It is considered best practice for educational psychologists to seek the views of key stakeholders, including the voice of the child (Fallon, Woods, & Rooney, 2010). EPs have a remit to explore the opinions and viewpoints of the child and often represent these views at joint home-school consultations, team around the child meetings and at tribunals. EPs often employ a range of psychological tools, including Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (Beck, 1976), Narrative Therapy (White, 1995) and Solution Focussed Brief Therapy (deShazer, 1988) to elicit the child's voice and to gain an understanding of the child or young person's perspective. Some voices such as the SLD voice however are perceived as more difficult to obtain as noted by Cameron and Murphy (2007) and Loyd (2012).

This study however, with an EP as the researcher, aimed to elicit, promote and describe the views of young people with SLD regarding their experiences of transition in order to gain insight into how EPs could better support them.

### **1.2. Defining Severe Learning Difficulties (SLD)**

Participants in this study were young people described as having severe learning difficulties. The Department for Children, Schools and Families (2009) (now the Department for Education) defined SLD in England and Wales as:

“Pupils who have significant intellectual or cognitive impairments. This has a large impact on their ability to access the curriculum without additional support. Difficulties with mobility, co-ordination, communication, perception and self-help skills are cited as common co-morbid factors associated with SLD. Some individuals with SLD may use signs and symbols to communicate, but most individuals with SLD can hold simple conversations.” (DCSF, 2009, p. 10)

Prior to the passing of the 1970 Education (Handicapped Children) Act, these children and young people were described as being “severely educationally sub-normal” and were considered “ineducable”. At that time responsibility for these children and young people was held by the Mental Deficiency Committees of the local Authorities which also managed most of the long stay hospitals or asylums (Male, 2015). Following the passing of the 1970 Act, responsibility for these individuals was transferred to Local Education Authorities (LEAs) (now LAs), which were then required to provide education suitable to their ages, abilities and aptitudes (Male, 2015). Almost exclusively, provision was a special school provided either by the LEA or a charitable institution. Emerson and Baines (2010) noted that despite a trend towards inclusion, the most likely educational

placement in England for children and young people with SLD is a special school. More recent statistics indicate that this trend is continuing. In 2014, the most frequent primary need of young people in special schools in England was identified as SLD (DfE, 2014).

### **1.3 Types of Need Often Associated with Young People with SLD**

There are some broadly definable characteristics which can be used to understand the needs of the SLD population. Individuals described as having SLD have been identified as a heterogeneous group with a range of personal characteristics, strengths, challenges and abilities (Giangreco, 2006; Imray & Hinchcliffe, 2014; Westling, Fox, & Carter, 2014). Imray (2005) noted that young people with SLD can be recognised as having difficulties with their communication, understanding abstract concepts, difficulty with their ability to concentrate and transfer information from their short term memory to their long-term memory.

Lacey (2009) added that these young people typically have inefficient and slow information-processing speeds, poor strategies for thinking and learning difficulties with generalisation and problem solving. Porter (2005) also reported that the learning difficulties experienced by young people with SLD are often co-morbid with higher than usual incidence of sensory, motor and health difficulties. It has also been suggested that the difficulties experienced by young people with SLD can be compounded by other factors, such as, a diagnosis of Autistic Spectrum Condition (ASC) (De Bildt, Sytema, Krajer, Sparrow, & Minderaa, 2005; Jordan, 2001) and a significantly higher than average chance of having

challenging behaviours (Allen et al., 2006; Emerson 1995; Harris, 1995; Male, 1996).

### **1.4 Prevalence of SLD in England**

Emerson and Baines (2010) estimated that 286,000 children and young people in England have learning difficulties. Approximately 70,000 of this population had a Statement of Special Educational Needs (SEN) with one third being described as having SLD. (A statement of SEN is a legal document detailing a young person's learning difficulties and the special educational support the young person requires). Statements are being replaced by documentation called Education, Health and Care plans (EHCPs), under the government's Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Reform in 2014. The Department for Children, School and Families (DCSF, 2009) reported that in England the number of pupils with SLD rose by an average of 5.1 percent between 2004 and 2009. This reported increase supports the earlier argument by Emerson and Hatton (2008), who noted that factors such as increased survival rates from birth have correlated with the increases in the number of individuals with SLD. These figures indicate that young people with SLD are a growing population in the UK. It also highlights that more and more young people with SLD are going to be transitioning, with a trend towards inclusion, from post-16 school provisions to settings such as FE colleges and yet at present, there is very little understanding about this population, demonstrated by the dearth of research involving these young people and their transition.

## 1.5 Definitions of Transition

There is no shortage of guidance on the subject of transition for young people, including those with learning difficulties in the UK (for example, DfES, 2001; DoH, 2001, 2004). Government policies and guidance focus on transition planning, detail what a transition plan and a transition review meeting are and offer suggestions about which professionals should be involved in supporting transition; without clearly defining the term transition itself. There has also been much debate in transition literature as to how to best define transition (Ecclestone, 2007; Gallacher & Cleary, 2007; Stokes & Wyn, 2007). Arnold and Baker (2012) noted that different theoretical approaches have resulted in quite different ideas about transitions. In youth transition research, transition has been defined as both a process and phase as noted by Arnett (2004). It has also been identified as a measure of continuity and an indicator of discontinuity (Johnstone, 1995). Stringer and Dunsmuir (2012) have also argued that transition may be considered as a synonym for change and transition or change has the potential to cause psychological disruption, impacting on a young person's thoughts, feelings and behaviour.

The transition to FE could be considered both a phase and a process. The formal post-16 transition refers to the end of Key Stage 4 education in the UK (Dewson, Aston, Bates, Ritchie, & Dyson, 2004) which currently marks the end of compulsory schooling and is the first point at which young people can leave the education system. The move to FE has been noted within the literature as a clear rite of passage (Coles, 1995; Schulenberg & Schoon, 2012). Several studies on youth transition have defined transition to FE as a definitive phase in the move

towards adulthood (Ball, Maguire & Macrae, 2000; Coleman, 2011; Coles, 1995; Montgomery & Cote, 2003; Schulenberg & Schoon, 2012).

Griffiths (1994) noted that for young people with SLD it is possible that they will not experience other rites of passage in the transition to adulthood, such as marriage and having children. Therefore, their experience of college is an important step in their move towards achieving adulthood and requires further research and exploration as noted by Ward and Thomson (1997; quoted in Clegg, Sheard, & Cahill, 2001). There have been some studies relating to what transition is for young people and how to facilitate smooth transition for the general population (Pole, Pilcher, & Williams, 2005), as well as some studies of transition for young people with learning difficulties (Beyer, Kaehne, Grey, Shepherd, & Meek, 2008). However, there is little or no research looking specifically at the transition for young people with SLD to college.

Some research related to post-16 transition has identified transition as a process identifying transition planning and the pre-transition experiences, such as visits to new settings as important for young people (Cullen, Lindsay, & Dockrell, 2009; Walker, 2007). When researching transition in this way, often the focus is on the process, rather than the young person's immediate experience of their new learning environment. Although there have been some studies exploring the transition experience, these are often follow up studies taking place up to a year after the transition has happened (for example: Aston, Dewson, Loukas, & Dyson, 2005; Carroll & Dockrell, 2012; Palikara et al., 2009). Research has not specifically explored or captured the views of young people, particularly those with SLD, at the very beginning of their experience in a new learning environment.

Transition can also be defined differently in different contexts. Bronfenbrenner (2005) argued that transition is dynamic and interactive and occurs between the individual and their context. Bronfenbrenner (1979) defined transition as occurring "...whenever a person's position in the ecological environment is altered as a result of change in role, setting or both..." (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p26). Bronfenbrenner's eco-systemic approach views transition as complex, multi-faceted and non-linear. It suggests that the systems around the young person impact and influence their development. These systems are called the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. The eco-systemic approach implies that the experience of transition to college and towards adulthood can therefore be influenced by young person's family, friends, current education system, future education setting, and by the local and wider community. Bronfenbrenner's model has been used in youth research as a framework to understand transition influences (Hannah, Gorton, & Jindal-Snape, 2010).

### **1.6 The Current Study's Definition of Transition**

For the purposes of the current study, transition will be understood from Bronfenbrenner's eco-systemic perspective (1979). The holistic understanding of transition enables the study to consider the variables influencing transition, including the supportive and challenging factors impacting on the young people's experience of transition. From Bronfenbrenner's perspective (1979), the young people's experience of transition heavily depends on their interaction with their new learning environment and their social support networks. It also allows for the

context of the transition to be considered. For example, in the current study, the young people are all transitioning from different secondary age special schools (SLD schools, ASD units and a designated special provision) into a unit attached to a mainstream college.

### **1.7 Transition Needs of Young People with SLD Moving to FE**

The transition needs of young people with SLD have not been exclusively explored, therefore the transition needs of young people with learning difficulties more generally have been referred to in this section in order to outline and describe key factors in the transition experience. Researchers such as Arnett (2001) and Coleman (2011) have noted the impact and stress experienced by young people with learning difficulties moving from compulsory school to FE. The stress experienced during transition suggests that careful, structured planning is required in order to facilitate a positive transition for these young people. A literature review conducted by Townsley (2004) of the transition process for young people with learning difficulties identified some of the key needs which should be considered in planning school to FE transition. These include: supporting the young people's social needs by considering their relationships and friendships before and after the transition; their physical needs such as their self-care and keeping themselves safe in their new environment, supporting their ability to make decisions about their transition. Townsley (2004) also noted that the needs of the young person's family during the transition should also be carefully considered because it can be an emotionally demanding time for families as well.



## **1.8 Historical Context to Eliciting the Voice of a Vulnerable Population**

It has been argued (e.g. Boorman, Nind, & Clarke, 2009) that the trend towards eliciting the voice of the young people was prompted by the self-advocacy movement and instigated by reports such as the Plowden Report (DES, 1967). The Warnock Report (DES, 1978) further suggested that there was potential for eliciting views of those with SEN in decision making and the provision of educational experiences.

The self-advocacy approach was further recognised in the 1981 Education Act (HMSO, 1981) which not only included mention of pupil voice, but demanded that the young person's voice be considered and where possible, a partnership between young people and professionals should be developed. Garner and Sandow (1995) however, noted that the guidelines were not practically implemented and pupil voice was not actively sought. The SEND Code of Practice (DfE, 2014) has continued to make reference to the necessity of seeking young people's views and thus has strengthened this trend towards promoting the voice of the young person. A very substantial change within the SEND Code of Practice (DfE, 2014) and within the SEND Reform is the use of person centred approaches. The SEND Code of Practice (2014) has highlighted specifically the importance of children and young people participating in all the decisions about their education and future aspirations. It has also stated that schools, local authorities and all professionals involved with the child or young person should take a person centred approach to supporting young people by actively looking to gather the views about their needs. It has also been cited within the SEND Code of Practice (2014) and SEND Reform legislation (DfE, 2014) that young people

should be consulted about their transition experience and be included in research about them.

The SEND Reforms (DfE, 2011, 2014), which have sought to reform special needs provision in England, underline a government commitment to support young people with special needs, including their transition to FE and adulthood. In order to support this transition, the SEND Reform papers (2011) further emphasised the importance of promoting the voice of the young person and also extended the remit of all provisions and professionals including EPs from 0-19 years to 0-25 years. However despite this apparent agreement that the young person's voice must be elicited, there are issues related to eliciting and promoting the voice, particularly of vulnerable populations such as young people with SLD. Such issues are discussed in turn (below).

### **1.9 Issues Associated with Eliciting the Voice of the SLD Population**

Researchers have noted that students with learning difficulties are the leading authority on their lives and thus have certain rights allied to their feelings and perceptions (Germaine, 2004; Stalker, 1998). The United Nations Convention On The Rights Of The Child (UN, 1989) stated that young people who are capable of forming views have the right to receive and make known information pertaining to their well-being, to express an opinion, and have that opinion taken into account in any matters affecting them. Routledge and Gitsham (2004) argued that people with learning difficulties need to be given the opportunity to say how they wish to live their lives in order to help to determine what support and opportunities should be targeted for the young person. Carnaby et al. (2003)

however, reported that the post-school provision offered to young people with learning difficulties is likely to be decided by the types of provision available, alongside the current circumstances and abilities of the young person. Therefore, to target appropriate provision and opportunities, it is of considerable importance that the voices of these young people are elicited.

The Young Adults Transition Project (OHSNHST, 1999) reviewed transition services provided to young people with learning difficulties and found that young people often do not feel involved or informed in making decisions. Lloyd and colleagues (1996) argued that involving young people in decision making is no more than lip service, especially when the young person has a learning difficulty and or communication difficulties. Almost a decade later, Heslop et al. (2007) found that parents and professionals thought that some attempt had been made to include the young person's views at a point of transition; however, many felt that the young person's involvement continued to be a passive rather than an active process and to some degree tokenistic. Further to this, an OFSTED Report (2011) reviewed the practice of actively listening to the voice of the young person and critiqued cases where the young person was not asked about their views and feelings. The report also critiqued professionals who focussed on the needs of the parents, particularly parents with their own learning or emotional needs, thereby overlooking the primary needs, wants and viewpoints of the young person.

In Heslop and colleagues' (2007) study, a follow up interview was conducted with parents after their child had transitioned from one setting to another. Parents reported that involving young people in decision making was an

important factor in whether their child had a positive transition experience or not. Heslop et al. (2007) concluded that young people should be more involved in decision making so as to improve transition based on follow up interviews with parents after their child had made the transition to their new environment. Ward, Mallett, Heslop and Simons (2003) previously found that many of their participants were not involved in the decision making process around their transition. Carroll and Dockrell (2012) however, also described young people who are active participants in their transition, as an enabling factor in successful transition.

Methods of eliciting the voice of young people with learning difficulties have been introduced and evaluated in several studies (Cameron & Murphy, 2002; Fitzgerald, Jobling, & Kirk, 2003; Jelly, Fuller, & Byers, 2000). Stalker (1998) conducted a study around the methodological issues in eliciting choice for people with learning difficulties and found that “people with learning difficulties have increasingly come to be seen as reliable informants who hold opinions and have a right to express them” (Stalker, 1998, p5).

Despite the findings which have discussed the capacity of young people to express an opinion and the long standing government support for eliciting every pupil's voice, (DfE, 2014; DfES, 2001, 2004) there continues to be little research conducted with young people with severe learning difficulties. Carroll (2014), for example, concluded that her review of European empirical studies of transition for young people with learning difficulties demonstrated that this continues to be an under researched area, particularly in terms of the quantity of studies and the category of learning difficulty represented. It also highlights that there continues

to be much to learn about the transition experience of young people with learning difficulties, especially young people with SLD. The meta-analysis of research by Carroll (2014) spanned ten years, between 2002 and 2012 to represent current methodological and theoretical approaches. It included European studies where the young people with learning difficulties, either as a discrete group or as part of a wider study of learning difficulties, had their voice fundamentally included. Within these parameters, four studies used the umbrella term "learning difficulties," however, there are differences between those who have moderate, severe and profound learning difficulties and they should be grouped discretely. Not one study of young people with SLD as a discrete group was found or included.

Reasons why the young people with SLD are not included more in the literature remains unclear. The prevalence rates suggest an increase in the size of the SLD population and literature around eliciting the voice of vulnerable populations indicate their capacity to express their feelings and opinions. There is some literature around eliciting the voice of the young person with learning difficulties that refers to the complexities of interviewing or information gathering which may explain the paucity of research involving the voice of the young person with SLD (Clegg, 2004; Dockrell, 2004; Lewis, 2002; Porter, 2003). Researchers McGarry and Lunt (2006) acknowledged that there are difficulties associated with eliciting the viewpoint of the SLD population, but notably concluded that adolescents with SLD can communicate effectively about their aspirations for the future, when supported appropriately to do so. This however, raises the issue of competency and informed consent and is discussed further in

the methodology chapter. Dee (2007) argued that people with SLD need to be enabled to express their needs and preferences; providing them with a “vocabulary of experiences” (Dee, 2007, p. 406). The literature thus far, appears to suggest that it is both possible and desirable to elicit the perspectives of young people with SLD.

### **1.10 Participatory and Emancipatory Research**

Eliciting the voice of the young person with SLD must also consider the emancipatory and participatory nature of the population's involvement in the research. Participatory and emancipatory methodologies have enabled those with learning difficulties to make increasing demands to participate in research (Chappell, 2000). Participatory methodology has been an important development for learning difficulty research and is typically undertaken in partnership with people with learning difficulties rather than on their behalf. Zarb (1992) expressed a view that participatory research is a methodological goal in its own right, notably in the learning difficulty field. Drawing on work by Cocks and Cockram (1995), Chappell (2000) argued that participatory research was particularly important in questioning and deciding who should develop a study's research questions and be in control of the research process. Chappell (2000) further stated that research questions could be developed by either the disabled person or the non-disabled researcher, placing greater emphasis on the need to bring the questions to the attention of the non-disabled population. The current study's research questions were developed from the findings of previous research and conversations with professionals in the education sector. However, the questions

once developed into an accessible interview schedule were brought to the attention of and explored with the young people participating in the study.

Chappell (2000) also argued that alliances between researchers, disabled people and other experts are important for this kind of research; however, whilst alliances are important for a collaborative approach and ethos, the research must inherently remain in the interests of the people the research is about. Chappell's (2000) description of participatory research did not discuss the potential impact of such alliances within research. For example, the objectivity of the researcher could be influenced or the participants' responses and interests could be diluted. In discussing relationships between researchers and participants however, Walmsley and Johnson (2003) and Barnes (1992, 1996) noted that the researcher should abandon objectivity and side with the vulnerable population being researched. This however, would impact on the reliability and credibility of a study and will not be how the current study will approach the research or findings. Walmsley and Johnson (2003) argued that a strong characteristic of participatory research needs to be the accessibility of the research and research questions to its vulnerable participants; such as young people with SLD. This viewpoint is supported by Townsley (1998, 2004), who noted that young people can only meaningfully participate in research when they fully understand the research area or research questions being asked of them. The current study aimed to promote understanding by providing an accessible interview schedule which was supported with visual prompts and developed with input from a speech and language therapist colleague who specialises in improving the communication of young people with moderate to severe learning difficulties. The

interview schedule and accessibility is discussed further within the methodology chapter.

Arguments by Oliver (1990), Morris (1992) and Zarb (1992) provided definitions of emancipatory research which included a proposal that research should be used as a tool for improving the lives of disabled people. Chappell (2000) also noted that emancipatory research should be specifically beneficial to the population being researched. Chappell (2000) further characterised emancipatory research as an approach which requires researchers to adopt a reflexive stance and to be accountable to the population and community they are researching. Emancipatory research promises social change for vulnerable populations (Walmsley & Johnson, 2003) and for vulnerable populations, such as young people with SLD, aims to provide a forum to discuss issues and topics important to them.

Chappell (1992) noted that it has become widely acknowledged “that people with learning difficulties are the best people to ask if researchers want to know their views and experiences” (Chappell, 1992, p40). However researchers do not exclusively work with the young people to gather their views on topics directly relating to them. Often the views of young people in youth transition research are sought alongside professionals, parents and teachers’ views; which perhaps promotes the argument that young people are not capable of expressing a reliable viewpoint. (Aston et al., 2005; Beyer & Kaehne, 2008; Bloomer & Hodgkinson, 1997, 1999; Heslop & Abbott, 2007).

The current study featured elements of the participatory and emancipatory approaches. In adopting a participatory approach, the study aimed to capture and



## **YOUNG PEOPLE WITH SLD'S EXPERIENCE OF COLLEGE**

promote the views of young people with SLD. In providing young people with an opportunity to share their viewpoint on their own personal experiences of transition to college, the study aimed to demonstrate the capacity of those with SLD to provide insight into important life experiences. The young people were actively engaged in this research project; were involved in a process of member checking to add to the reliability of their study. The study aimed to benefit the young people involved by using their voices to add to the literature around transition to FE for young people with learning difficulties and demonstrating to the wider education community, the capacity of these young people to express their thoughts and feelings coherently.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

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An initial search was conducted of UK literature by entering the key words “severe learning difficulties” and “Transition to college” using the online database DERA. The literature search strategy including all search terms and the articles yielded are presented in Appendix A.

The literature search yielded nine hits, of which four were peer reviewed articles. It was evident that the search needed to be expanded to include other online databases and hand searches as a scarcity of research literature was obtained from this initial search. The online databases, ERIC, British Education Index (BEI) and PsychInfo were then utilised to expand the search across other fields of psychology to obtain more thorough results. A series of hand searches were then conducted to identify studies that were cited by other authors in the literature.

Finally, in an attempt to exhaust the search, it was expanded from young people with severe learning difficulties to young people with learning difficulties’ and their experiences of college transition. “Transition to college” remained a search term, along with “Successful college transition” and “young people’s experiences of transition.”

The review of the literature demonstrated that there is a dearth of research in this area and what was found was limited in its rigour, as will be discussed further in this chapter.

## 2.1 Transition to FE

Researchers have argued that the transition from compulsory schooling to FE can be a particularly stressful time for young people with or without learning difficulties (for example: Arnett, 2001; Coleman, 2011). Denovan and Macaskill (2012) explored the views and experiences of ten young people without learning difficulties as they transitioned to university in the UK. It was an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) study using semi-structured interviews. The young people in the study all to varying degrees reported the impact of change and having a support structure around them as key elements of how they experienced their transition. The researchers did not report on or qualify how the change experienced by the young people had impacted on their well-being. However, it was suggested that the transition period was a stressful time for some of their participants but required some psychological adjustment by all of their participants.

There were some methodological limitations to the study however. The authors used IPA to identify themes within the data. Whilst, the rationale for using IPA was clearly explained; Denovan and Macaskill (2012) did not however describe in depth their analytical procedure, making the study difficult to replicate and limited in its rigour and transparency. Their epistemological stance was also not stated clearly and consequently it was difficult to understand the perspectives, assumptions and values of Denovan and Macaskill and thus make sense of how their personal traits had impacted on their research. This was a notable limitation to their study as the researcher's perspective is an important factor in IPA research as argued by Smith (1996) and Smith and Osbourne (2003). The lack of

reflexivity in an IPA based study therefore limited the study's coherence. Also, the sample size was relatively small and although the size was appropriate for use with IPA, the sample was not large enough for the generalisations made by the authors about young people beginning at university.

### **2.2 Understanding the Transition of Young People with SEN from Different Perspectives**

Transition research very often includes the perspectives of the parents and professionals working with the young person in order to understand the transition experience of the young person. For example, Kaehne and Beyer (2009) conducted a study on the views of education professionals and staff in support services for young people with LD, as part of a bigger study of transition. Initially Kaehne and Beyer (2009) had followed 148 young people during their transition from school to post-school job placements. The professionals including SENCos, inclusion managers, support staff and career service managers were interviewed to describe the transition process and experience of young people to post-16 provision. This was a follow up survey of the educational professionals originally interviewed. Professionals had reported on what they thought were the desired outcomes of the transition for the young people. Increased independence was reported on several occasions by the professionals as being perhaps the most important aspiration and outcome for the young people moving to college. None of the professionals in the study however, identified or appeared to have considered the importance of friendships for the young people or commented on the value of supporting and promoting friendships during and after the transition

as a desired outcome. Perhaps it would have been more informative to explore the views and needs of young people with the young people themselves. This would have emphasised the importance of including pupil voice in research. The current study aims to promote pupil voice by exploring transition using only young people's perspectives and experiences.

Kaehne and Beyer (2009) sought to gain the views of educational professionals about transition after the young people had transitioned, which they did, and reported their findings accordingly and used appropriate evidence to demonstrate their findings. The findings however are limited by the study's response rate. Kaehne and Beyer (2009) reported that their response rate to their follow up questionnaire was noticeably low, however they did not report how many people they had sent their questionnaires to. Across 21 education settings in six boroughs, only 30 professionals responded to the questionnaire. Kaehne and Beyer (2009) had initially interviewed professionals across six Local Authorities (LAs) however they received significantly fewer responses to the follow up questionnaire, which has some impact on the findings of the study and how the findings were used to generalise about the needs and best outcomes for vulnerable young people during an important time of transition.

### **2.3 Research Including the Young Person's Views of Transition to FE**

Two studies explicitly including the views of young people with SLD were identified in the literature search and are critiqued below. However, due to the scarcity of literature including the voice of the young person with SLD specifically, the transition experiences reported by young people with other kinds of learning

difficulty were also considered and included in the literature review and will also be discussed in turn (below).

### ***2.3.1 The Experiences and Perspectives of Young People with SLD Transitioning to FE***

Aston and colleagues (2005) conducted a longitudinal study of young people with SEN to track and record their transition experience from compulsory school going to early adulthood. They surveyed 1,020 young people and included a range of SEN profiles in the sample, including young people with SLD. There were three waves or parts to the study and for the purposes of this literature review only the third wave is critiqued. This is because the third wave in Aston and colleagues' study includes the voices of the young people where the young people were asked to express their thoughts, feelings and reflections about their transition experience. Wave three surveyed the young people however, only one fifth of the original participant population (n=1,020) responded to the questionnaire. Quantitative findings indicated that 68% of the population surveyed found starting college "easy" or "fairly easy", with a significant number of young people reporting that their parents were the most helpful people in the decision making about college and were the factors most reported as making the transition easy.

Other factors reported by the young people were teachers, college tutors, friends and 2% of young people reported knowing someone at college, as the most important factor in an easy transition. Findings also included more than half of the young people reporting that it had been easy to make new friends in their

new environment; however, over a quarter of the young people who had attended a special school were identified as experiencing significantly more difficulty making friends in their new placement.

There were however several limitations to Aston and colleagues' (2005) study. First, the drop out rate in this third wave of their longitudinal research was a little less than 20%. The reason cited for this drop out rate was that young people refused to fax back the questionnaire. The piloting stage however demonstrated that the questionnaire did not consider the participants' literacy skills and that it was too long and young people found it repetitious. The researchers did not discuss in detail how they had amended the questionnaire or how its accessibility was judged following the findings of the pilot study. The accessibility of the questionnaire used in the study, considering the low response rate therefore remained questionable. Also, the young people in their study had a range of needs, some more severe than others and it appears, although quite unclear in the research, that only one version of the questionnaire was used and it does not appear to have included visual aids or prompts to support the individual needs of each of the young people in their study. The request to fax back the questionnaire may also have been a deterrent for the young people and they may have responded better to a telephone interview, face to face interview or an online, visually supported survey instead.

Second, the aim of this particular wave of the study was to consider specifically the challenges and supportive factors associated with the young people's transition; however it had been three years since the transition had occurred for the young people at the time of surveying. The time delay between

the transition experience and data gathering perhaps identifies a limitation in relation to the validity of the study and queries the reliability of the responses received three years after the transition was experienced.

Third, some of the claims made by Aston and colleagues (2005) about their findings did not always correlate with the quotes or evidence provided to support the development of their themes. For example, the authors stated that young people with SLD have little to do in managing their transition and were dependent on family and parents to make sure their transition outcome was a positive one. There was no evidence provided to support this claim, which is quite a significant one, relating to the autonomy of an entire population in the research without any explanation for the statement. This perhaps highlighted a limitation around the transparency and coherency in the study. Nonetheless, this study by Aston and colleagues is one of very few studies to distinctly include the SLD population in research around transition to post-16 provision and aimed to promote the viewpoints and perspectives of the transition experience for young people with severe learning difficulties more generally. It also demonstrated, despite its limitations that young people with learning difficulties are capable of providing researchers with insight into their lived experiences.

The second study to include the voice of young people with SLD specifically was conducted by McConkey in 2001 in Northern Ireland. This study explored the viewpoints of both parents (n=37) and young people with SLD (n=34) on their move from special school to post-school provision. The study was qualitative in nature and interviewed both the young people and their parents after they had transitioned to their new provision. Findings from the semi



structured interviews with the young people identified their parents and also teachers as the ones who made the decision about going to college. None of the young people interviewed could recall being involved in the process of decision making themselves. These findings are similar to those of Aston and colleagues (2005). Parents in McConkey's (2001) study however, reported that they wanted their young people to be more involved in the process and one parent wished that his child could develop and sustain friendships that they could carry through to college and beyond. Friendship had not been reported as important in the studies already mentioned in this literature review and prompted further searching of the literature for commentary on friendships which will be further discussed later in this chapter.

There were two notable limitations to McConkey's (2001) study however. First, six young people's interviews were discarded as the young people were deemed to be "not able to provide meaningful answers". The current study questions what "meaningful" meant in the McConkey study as there was no clear criteria detailed for how responses were deemed to be useful or not. Related to this; the details about the attempts made to elicit the young person's voice were not reported in the study. Other studies, such as Carnaby et al. (2003) reported attempts to elicit the voice of their participants with SLD and PMLD by encouraging them to illustrate, show photographs or use symbols to express themselves and participate fully in their interview.

The ethos and unique contribution of the McConkey (2001) study was to elicit the voice of the young people, which had not been done before and to further demonstrate the young people's ability to express their views and feelings.

However, without fully understanding how the views of the young people were sought and the decision to discard some of the young people's opinions on the basis of subjective "meaningfulness" are significant and fundamental issues within the study and questions the validity, reliability and transparency of the research.

Second and related to the first criticism of the study, the focus of the summary of findings and discussion was based predominantly on the parents' responses. The young people's views were referred to very little, if at all. The study therefore failed to give the young people a voice, one of its main objectives at the beginning of the study. The study also further promoted the argument that eliciting young people's voice is nothing more than tokenistic (Lloyd et al., 1996).

### ***2.3.2 The Perspectives of Young People with Other Learning Difficulties on their Transition to FE***

A review of transition studies called for more research to include young people with SEN and further identification of the barriers to successful transition (Stewart et al., 2010). Two studies were subsequently identified because they distinctly included both of these aspects. Both are discussed in turn below.

Carroll and Dockrell (2012) explored the perspectives of 19 young people aged between 19-23 years. All of the young people had a history of speech and language impairments, which is a different category of SEN in comparison to SLD. The young people's speech and language difficulties varied although all were more than one standard deviation below the mean on language and literacy

measures. The study explored the enabling and challenging factors of their post-16 education and employment outcomes with the young people. Carroll and Dockrell (2012) interviewed the young people, all of whom had attended the same residential special school. The interviews were semi-structured and participants were given prompt sheets about the interview topics prior to the interview. Key findings were that all the young people identified their parents as enabling factors in their transition outcome. Another important aspect was the professional support received by the young people during their decision making process before transition, the support at college from tutors and support with planning their futures after college. Whilst these findings are an important contribution into further understanding the young person with SEN's perspective about their transition, there were several notable limitations to the study.

First, the main aim of the study was to explore the barriers and supports identified by young people. Within the sample, young people generally reported flexible and constructive support at college; however views about the efficacy and appropriateness of the support varied. These responses were not further explored in the study and perhaps could have added further to the understanding of how young people access and perceive their college curriculum. The study instead focussed on the enabling elements of college support rather than highlighting the difficulties and barriers some young people faced.

Second, Carroll and Dockrell used a group of young people they had used as participants in a previous study two years before in a phone survey in their sample. A purposive sample coupled with familiarity between researchers and participants increases the possibility of response and/or reporter bias. The

potential for bias therefore, is another limitation of their study. Response bias occurs when a participant's answers are in some way influenced by their relationship with the researcher (Robson, 2002). Reporter bias occurs when the researcher selectively reveals or suppresses information gathered from their participants (Robson, 2002).

Third, Carroll and Dockrell (2012) reported the use of thematic analysis to analyse the young people's views, however they did not describe in detail the analytical procedure used to draw themes from the dataset. The study also did not make reference to whether a cross case analysis and individual analysis was carried out for each young person and limits the transparency and rigour of the study.

Fourth, the authors themselves identified a significant limitation in the study. Following the face to face interview, Carroll and Dockrell (2012) did not carry out a follow up interview. Transition is an ongoing process and their findings hold true only for one point in time in the young people's transition. The young people's perspectives could have changed in the months following the interview and a follow up interview and member check would have added to the rigour and coherency of the findings.

Fifth, a mean language and literacy score for the group of young people at the end of Year 11 were reported in the results section without explanation as to why they were being reported. The young people's scores were not reported individually and the rationale for the assessments used to gather the scores were not discussed or noted. The scores perhaps looked to provide an overall profile for the population being studied, perhaps for generalisability reasons; however,

the sample was a relatively small to moderate size and did not allow for large generalisations about the SLI population. Also, the types of speech and language impairment within the population were not discussed in conjunction with the mean language and literacy scores or when describing the participants in the methodology section. One of the aims of Carroll and Dockrell's study was to provide further understanding of the SLI population's transition experience; however, the SLI population were never identified or described. Their profile of need was only detailed using the table with the mean literacy and language score.

Cullen and Cullen (2015) conducted a longitudinal study of young people with Autism transitioning to post school education across three cohorts. Cohort one is focussed on by this study as it includes only young people who were transitioning from school to another provision in September 2014. This timeline was comparable to the current study. The Cullen and Cullen (2015) study was not initially identified in earlier searches of transition to FE as the study was not peer reviewed, which was an initial criterion of the literature search strategy. Also, one of its main aims was to evaluate a transition and person centred training programme provided to a range of mainstream and special secondary schools, as well as to post-school provisions in Gloucestershire, Yorkshire and London. The study however, also included pupil voice, interviewing 12 young people who had transitioned to college in September 2014. The young people's experiences of the transition were explored and their views were referenced verbatim and included in the findings of the evaluation study.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the young people and were framed by a person centred tool called "4+1 questions". The reasons for

using this tool and its advantages and disadvantages were not detailed within the report however. Also the young people in the study all met the criteria for “complex” autism; although they did not need to have a statement of special educational needs. “Complex” autism was defined as the young person having associated learning difficulties or was subjectively denoted as complex autism by professionals working with the young person. The individual needs of the young people or their transitional needs were not explored by the researchers when making conclusions about how best to support transition and the effectiveness of person centred approaches.

The young people did however describe their experiences of college. They made comparisons with their old provisions and spoke of their feelings, both positive and negative before the transition. Some of the young people reported feeling anxious or scared, while others reported feeling happy about the transition. The young people all reported visiting their FE provision prior to leaving school, although the frequency and kinds of visits varied. Some young people reported visiting the FE provision weekly to prepare for the transition and others reported visiting as part of an open day or taster session. The young people also reported feeling supported by their parents and family during their transition.

### **2.4 Supportive Factors in Transition to FE**

Heslop and colleagues (2007) identified several influential factors in the transition experiences of young people with SLD. Heslop et al. (2007) reported on the impact and experience of young people with SLD who had transitioned from one residential setting to another. Despite the transition being from residential

school to another residential school and not to FE, this study was included as it involved 15 young people with SLD, who were experiencing a transition from one setting to a post-16 provision. Heslop and colleagues also elicited the voice of their young people within their study through semi structured interviews during the transition and they followed up a year later with a second interview. Aston et al. (2005) also highlighted factors which impact on the transition experience of young people with SLD specifically.

From these studies, two strong contributing factors to positive transition experiences for young people with SLD emerged. These factors were the significant role of friendship in transition and the influence of family support during the transition experience. Also noted in the two studies was the importance of inclusion and feeling included in the new provision. Inclusive ethos of the learning environment, including support from college staff was denoted as essential to positive feelings at the point of initial transition. The role of friendship, family support and inclusion are further discussed below.

### ***2.4.1 Research Relating to the Role of Friendship in Transition***

During adolescence, researchers have suggested that there is an increase in the young person's awareness of the perceptions of them (Rosenblum & Lewis, 2003) which is associated with an enhanced desire for social affiliation (O'Brien & Bierman, 1988; Steinberg & Morris, 2000). Friendship during the adolescent years has been argued as being important to a young person's emotional, psychological and cognitive development (Rosenthal, 1993). It has also been argued that having secure, sustained friendships can be an indicator of

psychosocial adjustment (Burk & Laursen, 2005). Several researchers such as Furman (2002) and Santrock (2001) have commented on the context of adolescence as a developmental phase. They describe separation from parents, increased desire for independence and the importance of peer relationships as being key experiences during adolescence. During adolescence, parent-child conflicts appear to increase (Steinberg & Silk, 2002) and social affiliation with peers becomes increasingly important (Furman, 2002). Some researchers have even argued that as young people develop and mature, the influence of their peers becomes far greater than parental influence (O'Brien & Bierman, 1988; Young & Ferguson, 1979). Steinberg (2001) argued that parent-adolescent conflicts are a necessary part of the separation process from parents and moving towards adulthood. Santrock (2001) argued that the friendships during adolescence and parent-adolescent conflicts are particularly important and peers serve to inform young people about the world outside of their own family.

Parker and Gottman (1989) argued that friendship serves different functions for children and young people at different points in their development. In adolescence, Parker and Gottman (1989) proposed that friendships serve as support for the individual young person in their self-exploration and provide young people with the opportunity to make sense of and integrate logic and emotions.

In relation to adolescents and friendships at school, it has been suggested that because young people are educated in groups, they are likely to experience social interactions which influence their perspectives and attitudes towards learning (Brechwald & Prinstein, 2011). Chu (2005) further argued that peer relationships support important psychological functions in development; such as



promoting a sense of belonging and relatedness for the young person. Helpful factors in transition described by Flammer and Alsaker (2006) include having a group of friends to transition with. Some studies, as noted earlier, have highlighted friendship as an important factor in transition, and as both a supportive and challenging factor in the transition experience.

McConkey's study (2001) of young people's experience of transition found that many young people in their sample cited "friends they liked" as an important and supportive factor in their successful transition to FE. While the sample size in this study was relatively small, 34 young people and 37 parents were interviewed, the study could be critiqued for not providing an understanding of the young people's views in the same way they did when they presented the parent viewpoint; other studies have had similar findings (for example: Heslop et al., 2002; Heslop et al., 2007).

A study by Heslop et al. (2007) whose sample size was equally as small, followed young people moving on from one residential school to another residential setting and reported similar findings about the young people's value of friendship. Two of the young people in the study reported that they felt their transition was supported because they knew some of the people living in their new placement and felt their transition was successful because they had friends they could relate to. The study by Heslop and colleagues (2007) also demonstrated the challenge associated to transition and friendship, with several of the young people reporting that their transition was difficult because they felt isolated, lonely and missed their friends from their previous setting.

Several other studies have reported on the important positive social

contribution of friendship on the transition experience of young people with different forms of learning difficulty (Abbott & Heslop, 2009; Palikara et al., 2009; Whitehouse, Watt, Line, & Bishop, 2009). Hartup (1992) reported that social networks and emotional connections that young people establish and maintain with other young people may constitute a key source of social support for young people in coping with stress and adjustment difficulties.

Researchers have demonstrated that friendship can promote positive adjustment, particularly during times of transition (e.g. Berndt & Keefe, 1995). Rubin, Coplan, Chen, Buskirk and Wojslawowicz (2005) however argued that the association between friendship and adjustment becomes more complex with age and does not easily explain school satisfaction scores later on in education. Other factors which impact on the transition of young people specifically to FE provisions are reported in the following paragraphs of this literature review.

### ***2.4.2 The Role of Family Support in Experiences of Transition***

The role of family and parents in supporting the transition of young people with learning difficulties has been well-documented in the literature. The literature also highlights the kinds of support provided by the family to the young person at times of transition, such as practical support with accessing services (Blacher, 2001) or emotional support and encouragement (Cooney, 2002; Mitchell, 1999). Morris (2002) argued that the role of parents and families is often not considered by educational professionals during the transition process. However, within the literature, studies have clearly identified the parents' role and importance in transition planning and the transition process in particular (McConkey, 2001;

Neece, Kraemer, & Blacher, 2009; Stewart et al., 2010; Test et al., 2009). These findings were gathered from interviews with parents and professionals supporting the young people and also from the young people themselves. Parental support has been a significant finding in research including parent viewpoints (Heslop et al., 2002; Heslop et al., 2007) and it is perhaps not a surprise that parents identify themselves as a key source of support for their young people in times of transition.

However, findings from the few studies which have elicited the voice of the young person with SEN around post-16 transition and transitional support to have suggested that young people recognise and value the support received from their parents during their transition (Aston et al., 2005; Landmark, Ju, & Zhang, 2010). Young people in Aston and colleagues' (2005) study identified their parents and also the extended family as the top two factors which impacted positively on their transition experience to post-16 provision. The young people also cited their parents as the most helpful factor in decision making about post-16 provision in Aston and colleagues' study. These findings are supported by Landmark et al. (2010), who reviewed what best practice in transition planning looks like. The studies reviewed included young people with a range of SEN. The young people across these studies all identified their parents as the most influential factor on their transition experience. Carroll and Dockrell's (2012) study also reported similar findings.

### ***2.4.3 Support from Teaching Staff at College***

Support from staff in both the school and the post-16 provision has been highlighted as another factor young people report as helpful or not helpful to their transition. Studies have shown that attitudes of teachers towards inclusion impacts on how they approach young people and facilitate an inclusive learning environment for all their students (Aston et al., 2005; Blacher, 2001; Heslop et al., 2002; Heslop et al., 2007). Research with young people has demonstrated that young people find staff at their new provision impact on how they experience their new environment and how supported they feel (Aston et al., 2005; Carroll & Dockrell, 2012; Cooney, 2002; Jacklin, Robinson, O'Meara, & Harris, 2007; McConkey, 2001). Some of the young people in McConkey's study (2001) felt staff had positively impacted their transition, noting that college staff were the reason they liked college. However other studies, such as Jacklin et al. (2007) noted the equally negative impact college staff can have on the transition experience of young people. The young people in Jacklin and colleagues' (2007) study identified lack of support from teachers at college and negative attitudes from teachers as key barriers to their transition experience.

### ***2.4.4 Feeling Supported in the New Learning Environment***

In addition to feeling supported, young people have also reported that a sense of familiarity aides their transition experience (Aston et al., 2005; Jacklin et al., 2007; McConkey, 2001). The limitations of the Aston et al. study in 2005, have been previously noted in this literature review however findings from their study explored the factors associated with an easy transition with young people.

The young people cited several main factors associated with promoting their positive transition including a small percentage of young people reporting that knowing someone at college was the key factor in their experience of an easy transition to college.

### **2.4.5 *Inclusive Ethos***

A sense of belonging is a fundamental human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). The ethos of the education setting has also been listed by young people as an important factor in their transition experience. Munn, Lloyd and Cullen (2000) explored the impact of school ethos by pairing and comparing schools with high and low exclusion rates. The study had a relatively low response rate, however the findings identified four key aspects of an education setting's ethos. While Munn and colleagues' (2000) study is subject to responder bias, it offers some insight into how inclusiveness can be constructed in education settings. For example, the findings from students, staff and other professionals recognised that beliefs about the school, teaching practice and pupils played a part in a school's inclusiveness. The schools with lower excluding rates professed to educate all students, stimulate pupil motivation and offer a flexible, differentiated curriculum.

A study by Hatton (2013) reported similar findings to the Munn and colleagues' study (2000); exploring the beliefs of teaching staff about inclusion. Participants were taken from schools which had been classified into excluding and non-excluding schools based on their exclusion rates. Findings suggested that staff in non-excluding schools shared consistent beliefs about inclusion with each other compared with their peers in excluding schools. There appeared to be

in the findings a lack of consistent and coherent understanding in the excluding schools about young people having varying and wide ranging needs and the importance of being an inclusive provision. Hatton (2013) concluded that her findings required school staff to be supported to develop the understanding that the needs of all pupils can be met within the environment. These findings relate to government guidance which noted that inclusive schools have “an inclusive ethos; a broad and balanced curriculum for all pupils...” (DfES, 2001, p.3).

### ***2.4.6 Accessibility of the College Curriculum***

Crawford (2012) reviewed literature relating to the transition of young people with disabilities from school to work or post-secondary education and training in the United States and the United Kingdom. The review did not detail its inclusion or exclusion criteria or its search strategy. The author also did not detail what analysis tool he used to produce themes from within the literature. The findings however, from Crawford's literature review identified a particular recurring theme around meeting the young person's needs. Crawford concluded from his meta-analysis that post-secondary education and training for young people with learning difficulties were not responsive to the comprehensive needs of these young people.

Robinson and colleagues' (2007) qualitative exploration of young people with disabilities transition experience identified a number of problems with transition to college for these young people. Lack of inclusive teaching, non-availability of support and insufficient time with tutors were all highlighted as key issues associated with a difficult transition to college. Accessibility and curriculum

content was also cited in the Carroll and Dockrell (2012) study of young people with specific language impairment transitioning to college. Several of the young people in their sample felt that the college curriculum was not suited to them and was not challenging enough.

### **2.5 Summary of Research Findings**

Feeling supported and aware of the support structures around them during their transition was a recurrent theme across the literature. Research with young people without learning difficulties, with unspecified difficulties and with SLD all identified parents as being an important source of support. The two studies which focussed on the transition of young people with SLD to FE noted that young people identified their parents as having a role to play in their decision to go to college, as well as supporting them through the transition period.

The young people in three of the studies critiqued (Aston et al., 2005; Carroll & Dockrell, 2012; McConkey, 2001) all reported feeling understood at college or in their new provision. All the young people in these studies alluded to feeling a sense of belonging in their new provision, feeling understood and included, indicating that this had impacted significantly on how they had experienced their transition. The young people in the Aston et al., study identified college staff who were understanding and supportive as being an important factor in their transition experience. McConkey reported similar findings and Carroll and Dockrell (2012) noted that young people associated feeling a sense of belonging and understanding with how appropriate they felt the setting and curriculum was in meeting their needs. Heslop et al. (2002) however noted that their young

people felt anxious about their transition to a new residential setting and related it to fears of not being understood and not having their needs met, and some of the young people in the study reported experiencing a negative transition because of these fears.

Promoting independence was also an important issue within the literature reviewed. McConkey's study (2001) reported that the parents in his sample wanted their young people to be more active in the transition process and Kaehne and Beyer (2009) noted that the professionals they interviewed identified supporting the young person to be more independent was the most desired outcome of transition planning for post-school life. Studies including the voice of the young person did not report on how the young people felt about being more autonomous or what their perceptions of transitioning to FE were.

Finally, friendship was a prevalent theme across the literature reviewed. Both parents and young people identified peers as being sources of support during their transition. Aston and colleagues also reported that young people found making new friends easy, although a quarter of young people who had transitioned from a special school experienced more difficulty making new friends. Parents in McConkey's study (2001) reported wanting their young people to be able to make and sustain friendships in college and into adulthood. The professionals interviewed in Kaehne and Beyer's study (2009) however did not acknowledge the importance of friendship or the importance of helping young people to maintain old friendships during the transition process.

Across the research however, the young people were described in homogenous terms and the individual differences of each participant did not



appear to be considered. This perhaps relates to how the voice of the young person was explored within the research. Across all the studies critiqued, none explained how they had elicited the voice of young people with learning difficulties. The intended focus particularly of Heslop and colleagues' (2002) study was to promote the voice of the young person with SLD; however the voice of their parents was referenced more in the findings.

The follow up data gathering procedures across the studies was not consistent. The time delay between initial and follow up data gathering varied greatly and perhaps influenced the low response rates at follow up and the recall of the transition experience. Also, none of the studies reported member checking their findings with the young people or providing feedback. The research reviewed appeared to focus on the transition process and planning and none of the studies explored the transition experience of the young people as they were experiencing it.

### **2.6 Contributions of the Current Study to the Literature**

Having reviewed the literature and summarised it, the current study has identified some gaps in the literature and developed two research questions in response to this. The research questions are:

RQ 1: How do young people with SLD experience their initial transition from post-16 school to FE?

RQ2: What do the young people consider to be the supportive and challenging factors in their transition?

The current study aims to explore the initial transition of the young people exclusively, using the voice of the young people as the primary source of data. Unlike the previous studies in the literature, parents or professionals' views were not sought. The study also identified participants as a heterogeneous sample, acknowledging the young people's individual differences and actively promoting their individual voices in the research. The current study also included a follow up interview six weeks after the young people had transitioned to FE. Previous studies such as McConkey (2001) included follow up interviews, however these were often conducted after a long period of time. This required young people with learning difficulties to be able to recall and reflect upon their experiences months if not years prior and perhaps was not sensitive to their needs and difficulties, some of which have been discussed in the introductory chapter of the current study. The current study is the first to acknowledge the potential difficulty of recalling detailed information about previous experiences by introducing a follow up interview with the young people in the same academic term and within a six-week period. The aim and purpose of the follow up interview is discussed later in the methodology chapter.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

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#### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter describes in detail the development of this research project including a description of “what happened” in the study and the philosophical framework guiding the study. The rationale for the case study approach is outlined and details of how the participants were selected are provided. The data collection and analysis techniques used are also outlined. The ethical considerations are also presented in this chapter.

#### **3.2 Philosophical Approach: Pragmatism**

One of the principles of the pragmatic approach is using what works for the research, using the most appropriate research procedures, as and when to address the research problem. Creswell (2013) noted that the pragmatic approach encourages the researcher to choose methods, techniques and procedures flexibly and dynamically to meet the needs of study. The ontological belief of pragmatism is that reality is what is useful, is practical and is what works. The epistemology of pragmatism suggests that reality is known through using many tools of research that reflect both deductive and inductive evidence.

The pragmatic approach was adopted for this study because it appeared to best fit with the study's aim to elicit the vulnerable young person's viewpoint in an accessible and ethical way. When working with a population such as young people with SLD it was important that the questions being asked were completely

accessible to them; which meant that different approaches and tools were required at different times during the interview in order to fully and appropriately elicit the young person's voice as clearly as possible. Different modalities were available to the young people to encourage them to express their viewpoints and the data collection was adapted and flexible in order to capture the young people's views as clearly as possible. The interviews and tools used are discussed later in this chapter.

### **3.3 Research Design: Individual Case Studies**

The current study is qualitative in nature because an objective of the study was always to elicit the perspectives of young people with SLD in order to capture their initial experiences and perspectives of college. Qualitative research has many possible definitions, however, it is typically considered as an approach to research that uses methodologies designed to provide rich, contextualised pictures of an experience or social phenomenon (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Schwandt, 2001). Mertens and McLaughlin (2004) cited several features typical of most qualitative research. These include; i) the goal to elicit understanding and meaning and ii) the researcher being the primary instrument for data collection. Mertens and McLaughlin (2004) also argue that a qualitative study should provide findings that are "richly descriptive, providing a full contextual picture of the phenomenon under study" (Mertens & McLaughlin, 2004, p96).

### ***3.3.1 Case Study Versus Narrative Approach***

There are many approaches to qualitative research. Tesch (1990) identified 26 different types in an analysis of research tools. The case study method and narrative approach were included in Tesch's findings both of which were considered for use in the current study. The study could have been approached from either design. Creswell (2013) noted that the case study and narrative approach are very similar when the unit of analysis is a single individual, although the data collection and analysis methods differ significantly.

The narrative approach was considered for use in this study. Riessman (2008) argued that the narrative approach was best for capturing detailed stories or life experiences of a single individual and requires the researcher and the participant to co-construct the meaning of each story shared. Creswell (2013) however noted that one of the critiques of the narrative approach was the extensive amount of information required about the participant in order to develop a cohesive and coherent narrative and narrative analysis. The limited language abilities of the young people in the current study may have limited the construction of a narrative of their transition experience and subsequently inhibited the narrative analysis of their experience.

The case study method was preferred because it focussed on each young person's viewpoint of their experience and allowed for their views to be individually analysed as well as compared across the group of young people. The current study provides some context to each participant, however, the focus of the research is on the viewpoints of young people with SLD, rather than their previous chronological life experiences considered in narrative analysis. These

reasons, coupled with the aims of this study and the language abilities of the young people served as a strong rationale in choosing the case study approach as the design for this study. The case study approach was the best fit to provide a holistic and contextual understanding of the transition experience for the young people.

### ***3.3.2 Use of the Case Study with Vulnerable Populations***

The case study design has played an important role in special education research because of the emphasis on the individual (Mertens & McLaughlin, 2004). The case study approach has been used with vulnerable populations, such as those with severe autism (Ferguson, 1992) and the hearing impaired population (Evans, Bullinger, & Hygge, 1998; Evans, Hygge, & Bullinger, 1995). In these studies, the young people were represented and understood on an individual basis, with findings then compared across the group of learners. In both studies by Evans and colleagues (1995, 1998) the samples were small in scale, however the experiences of the hearing impaired population were explored in depth on a case by case basis and every participant was treated as an individual.

### ***3.3.3 Use of the Case Study in this Current Study***

There are several types of qualitative case study, defined by what they aim to explore, the size of the case and the intent of the case analysis. The present study conducted a collective case study, in which each young person was treated

as an individual case within the umbrella case study of young people with SLD. Cases were not generalised from one to the other; rather each case was analysed individually as suggested by Creswell (2013), who recommends that the researcher provides a detailed description of each case and identify the themes within each case. This is called within case analysis and is followed by a cross case analysis of the data. The purpose of the cross case analysis is to identify recurring themes across cases.

### **3.4 Pilot Study**

A pilot study was conducted in May 2014, prior to the young people's transition to college in September 2014. The pilot study tested the interview schedule and examined if the insight gained from the literature review had sufficiently informed the interview schedule. The pilot interview was conducted with a young person with SLD and Autism, anonymously called "Joseph", who had already experienced the transition from compulsory schooling. Permission to interview this young person was sought from both the young person and his parent. One of the aims of the pilot study was to identify any areas the interview schedule would not elicit sufficiently. The pilot study was also used as an opportunity to consider the language used in the questions and identified questions which required rephrasing, a concrete example or excluding from the study. The pilot allowed for reflection about the kind of interviewing environment; the atmosphere created during the interview situation should be appropriate and demonstrate sensitivity, openness, trust and respect as suggested by Kvale and Brinkman (2009).

### ***3.4.1 Outcomes of the Pilot Study***

Although difficult to generalise for a heterogeneous population, findings from the pilot study suggested that the interview schedule was accessible to a young person with SLD. Joseph appeared to find the computer based visual prompts useful alongside verbal prompting and gentle redirection. During the interview, he spoke of living in Bournemouth with his friends; however, the term “living away from home” was difficult for Joseph to conceptualise. He informed me that his house in Bournemouth was home and that where his mother and brother lived was their house and not home for him. This indicated that it would be important to develop a shared understanding of terms and concepts with the young people in the current study. For example, establishing common terminology such as how the young people refer to college, whether they call it by the college's name, by the specialist provision's name or just refer to it as college would be an important aspect in fully understanding their perspectives. Also during the pilot interview, Joseph's brother entered the room accidentally and Joseph wanted to stop to tell him how the interview was going. He told his brother about the questions he was being asked and when his brother asked about the answers he had given, the young person spoke at length about his responses and when prompted by his brother, provided further insights about his transition experience. The presence of Joseph's brother illustrated that providing the young people in the study with the option of having a familiar adult present during the interviews may further promote and support the voice of the young people.



### **3.5 Selecting the Participants**

#### **3.5.1 Sampling Method**

Young people were selected using the purposive sampling method. The principal selection mode in purposive sampling is the researcher's judgement as to typicality or interest (Robson, 2002). It involves identifying participants who have knowledge or experience of the phenomenon being experienced. It differs from representative sampling, which aims to accurately reflect the wider population. Purposive sampling was appropriate for this study as it facilitated a detailed exploration of transition for a small sample of young people with SLD.

Willig (2001) argued that purposive sampling is particularly important when conducting case study research noting that cases need to be carefully selected so that the research can best understand the focus of exploration, i.e the transition process experienced by young people with SLD. Purposive sampling required clear parameters for the sample population. Inclusion criteria were therefore developed to identify cases which would lead to an understanding about the young people's experience of transition to FE. Participants had to meet the following inclusion criteria:

- All participants had to be a member of the SLD population, with SLD named as their primary need on their statement of special educational needs.
- All young people had to have begun attending a FE provision in September 2014.

- All the young people could have other special educational needs in addition to SLD (SLD is often co-morbid with other difficulties such as Autism).

### **3.5.2      *The Context of the Sample***

To identify participants, the two specialist SLD secondary schools in the borough where I work as a trainee educational psychologist, were contacted to discuss the possibility of working with some of their Year 13 students. It was suggested by staff at the secondary schools that contacting the local FE college, where a purpose built centre for young people with SLD had been built would significantly widen my search for participants. The provision contacted was a large mainstream college maintained by the borough. The centre was specifically built for delivering a differentiated college education to young people with SLD. The centre is attached to the mainstream college and although it has its own outdoor space, the centre promotes inclusion for its young people by sharing the lunch space and library with the mainstream college. Verbal consent was received from both the mainstream college and the centre before commencing the research, with feedback of the findings scheduled to take place at the beginning of September 2015. Feedback will also be provided to the young people and their parents at this time. Feedback summaries of the research will be provided and will include visual content to make it accessible for the young people.

### **3.5.3     *The Participants***

The sampling criteria for inclusion in the study were shared with the centre manager to help identify participants. All of the young people in the centre were approached about participating in the study as they had all met the inclusion criteria. Those who expressed interest in participating were then provided with a word and picture based consent form. Parental consent was also sought from the young people's parents and/or carers. Participants were briefed in advance of taking part regarding the nature of the research. The briefing was conducted using a word and picture based information sheet and was read through together with the young people before the young person was asked to decide if they wanted to take part. A copy of the consent forms and information sheets for the young people and their parents is presented in Appendix B. There was no ideal number of participants originally identified prior to beginning the current study. Of those approached, six young people consented to take part; however, before the first interview, one young person exercised their right not to participate in the study. Informal descriptions of each of the five young people participating in the research are presented below as pen portraits. Individuals described as having SLD have been identified as a heterogeneous group with a range of personal characteristics, strengths, challenges and abilities (Giangreco, 2006; Imray & Hinchcliffe, 2014; Westling et al., 2014). The portraits aimed to provide some contextual information about the young people, their backgrounds, likes and dislikes, and emphasise the individuality of each of the participants in the study.

### LEE

Lee is an 18-year-old charming young man, who is described as having SLD and also Tourette's syndrome. Discussion with the centre manager and review of his transition plan indicated that Lee's receptive and expressive language skills were more representative of a young person with moderate learning difficulties (MLD) rather than SLD. However, his primary need was named as SLD in his statement of SEN. Lee was also described as having some processing difficulties. He was working within the P levels and level 1 in the National curriculum. Prior to starting at college, Lee attended a local special secondary school for young people with moderate to severe learning difficulties. He is the youngest child in his family and has a cousin who attends the same college. At college, Lee enjoys computers and going to the library and could not think of any subject or lesson that he disliked. Lee particularly likes music by the band Blur and song two from Blur's debut album is his all time favourite Blur song. Lee likes to spend time using Youtube to watch music videos and playing the computer game Minecraft on his Xbox. When asked to describe himself in three words, Lee told me that pizza is one of his favourite foods, has lots of friends at college, has three wishes for his future and likes KitKats. His three wishes for the future were to one day own his own laminator, printer and laptop.

### REMA

At the time of the first interview Rema was 17 years old but was due to celebrate her 18<sup>th</sup> birthday the weekend after the interview. Rema was excited about turning 18, to celebrate with her family and had asked for a phone and a

necklace for her birthday. At the follow up interview, Rema talked of celebrating with her family and her sister in particular and her birthday party. She is a friendly and engaging young person who, before beginning at college had attended a local special secondary school for young people with SLD. Discussion with the centre manager and review of her transition plan indicated also that Rema had some difficulty with her receptive language and her expressive language abilities were reinforced by the use of Makaton signing. Rema was working within the P levels in the National curriculum. She is the youngest in her family and one of her favourite things to do is to go shopping and have her nails painted. When asked to tell me about herself, Rema told me that she loves to eat cake, her favourite colour is purple and she likes to listen to music and keep headphones in her schoolbag. Working hard is something Rema liked about being at college and at the follow up interview, cooking was her least favourite subject.

### **JORDAN**

Jordan is a 16-year-old boy who talked quickly and confidently about being at college. Jordan had SLD and Autism named in his statement of SEN. Challenging behaviours in Jordan's mainstream secondary school had resulted in him being on a reduced timetable. He attended his mainstream secondary school two days a week and special secondary school one day a week before college. Discussion with the centre manager and review of his transition plan described Jordan as having good receptive and expressive language abilities when compared with some of his peers with SLD. He was working within the P levels in the National curriculum. Jordan did not talk about having brothers or sisters but

talked a lot about his mother and the support he receives from her. Jordan reported liking college a lot but did not like maths or anything to do with science. He particularly liked ICT, cooking and travel training at college. Jordan told me that he did not like getting out of bed in cold weather, can be a fussy eater and that pink was probably his least favourite colour. Particularly important to Jordan was the quiet and less busy atmosphere of his college provision as well as the size of the classroom. Jordan spoke about not being sure about his plans after college but was happy to enjoy his college experience without worrying too much about that.

### LYDIA

Lydia is a friendly 19-year-old young woman. She attended the same special secondary school as Rema before starting at college. Discussion with the centre manager and review of her transition plan indicated also that Lydia has better expressive language compared with her receptive language abilities. Lydia was working within the P levels and level 1 in the National curriculum. Lydia is the youngest in her family and spoke fondly of the support she receives from her mother and older siblings. Lydia also spoke at length about being an aunt and proudly named all her nieces and nephews. Music and using the computers are favourite lessons at college for Lydia and she especially likes playing the drums at college, something she had never tried prior to starting at college. When asked to tell me a little about herself, Lydia told me she enjoys listening to music on her mini iPod, likes fast food, especially Thai and Chinese food and on Sundays she enjoys having a lie in. Lydia noted that making tea, coffee and hot chocolate in

the morning at the start of the college day and having lunch with her friends in the canteen were important parts of her day at college. She also spoke about her plans for after college and felt confident that she could get a job once she left college and was excited about this.

### **MATTHEW**

Matthew is a 16-year-old young man who had attended an out of borough special secondary school for young people with SLD and Autism before starting at college. Matthew had had some difficulty in his previous school relating to challenging behaviour but since starting at college had not demonstrated any of these behaviours. Discussion with the centre manager and review of his transition plan indicated that Matthew's receptive language was a particular strength of his, however he had very limited expressive language abilities, but could construct three to four word sentences. He was working within the P levels in the National curriculum. Matthew is a quiet young man, who told me that he enjoys playing computer games on his Playstation. When asked to share something else about himself, Matthew told me his father had a beard like his. He also listed some of his favourite foods such as apples, chicken, eggs, rice and sweets and was clear about disliking mushrooms. Matthew also told me that he likes all music, particularly a song by Korean pop artist Psy, called "Gangnam Style" and the boy band JLS, but does not like opera music. Matthew particularly likes going on trips and going swimming at college and enjoys Maths.

### **3.6 Data Collection Method: Semi-structured Interviews**

Interviewing provided an opportunity to outline the young people's experience through what is "essentially a meaning making process" (Seidman, 1998, p.1). Questionnaires were considered but have been critiqued for being less likely to capture individual experiences (Seidman, 1998). Ethnographic approaches were also considered for collecting the data; however, the timescale for the study and the ethical implications of observing a vulnerable group through a significant period of change were reasons for not adopting such an approach.

Semi-structured interviews are used instead of questionnaires based on the aims of the study. A key strength of this method is that it provided flexibility during the interview process. The present study looked to engage the young people with SLD and to explore and understand their experiences of transition to FE. The flexibility associated with semi-structured interviews meant that the order of questioning could change as needed, and that particularly pertinent areas of their college experience could be explored in further detail, allowing time for the participants to expand on a response.

In order to capture the subjective experiences of the participants, semi-structured interviews were used as my data collection method. Semi-structured interviews have a structure and purpose but are flexible to allow time and space for the young people to answer a range of open ended questions. Livesey and Lawson (2010) suggested that the objective of the semi-structured interview is to understand the participant's viewpoint rather than to make generalisations. Kvale and Brinkman (2009) however, noted that whilst the semi-structured interview can be framed as conversational interactions, there should be some structure



and purpose to the interview. The interview schedules were informed by the current literature on transition, the information gathered during piloting and discussion with a speech and language colleague to ensure it was as accessible as possible.

### **3.7 Interview Procedures**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each young person in September 2014, when the young people had just experienced the transition into FE. This was denoted as T1 and this term is used to describe the first interview. The young people were interviewed a second time, after the half term break in early November 2014, in order to provide the young people with an opportunity to share and/or add to their experiences of college having had an initial "settling in" period. This was denoted as T2 and used to describe the second interview. Cameron and Murphy (2002) recommended returning to the participants for a follow up interview to consolidate data. One young person was unavailable for the follow up interview in November. All of the interviews took place in a classroom at the college. The information sheets were revisited with each of the young people before both interviews and they were reminded that they could decide to end the interview at anytime. The interviews lasted between 20-55 minutes. The interviews were recorded on tape using a Dictaphone.

### **3.8 Accessibility of the Interview Schedule**

Nind and Hewett (1994) have stressed the importance of both verbal and physical methods to support a young person with special needs; specifically, with the development of their communication skills. The interview questions were presented to the young people multi-modally, using speech, visual prompts and gesture. This multimodal approach was designed to enable young people to access the information in ways that were easiest for them and to allow them to respond in the way in which they preferred to communicate (Cambridge & Forrester-Jones 2003; Minkes, Townsley, Weston, & Williams, 1995; Murphy, 1998). The interview questions were supported in several ways to elicit the young people's views to the fullest, including using computer based visual prompts. The visual cues for the interview schedule aimed to engage the young person by fixing them on the topic and questioning them in a friendly manner and accessible manner.

The computer based visual cues tool was preferred to other visual prompts, such as photographs or Talking Mats (Murphy, 1998). Talking Mats are a powerful but limited tool. Talking Mats enable young people to indicate their likes and dislikes and operates by providing choices to the participant, which they categorise as like, dislike or are indifferent about. The topics and picture prompts however, have to be pre-organised and can limit the conversation between the researcher and the participant. Unlike Talking Mats, computer based visual cues did not look to funnel the young people's answers, but merely support their understanding of the question being asked of them.

In the first interview, visual prompts on a tablet were used. The use of

computers as a supportive structure in promoting communication with young people with learning difficulties has been noted in the literature (Bozic & Murdoch, 1996; Whiting & Chapman, 2000). The prompts provided visual clues about the question being asked of the young people. Central to devising this tool for the young people was understanding the mode of communication each of them used best. Conversations with the centre manager and colleagues from speech and language services helped to shape and develop the visual prompts. Examples of the computer based visual prompts and interview schedule are presented in Appendix C.

In the second interview, a summary of first interview was shared with each young person and they were asked if there was anything else they wanted to add about their experiences of college since September. The visual prompts were used to help frame the conversation with the young people, however other tools were also provided to ensure all the young people could express their views to the best of their abilities. Two of the young people for example did not interact with the computer based visual prompts; one young person was particularly distracted by the presence of the tablet and found it more distracting than helpful. The visual cues however were necessary to prompt the young people and redirect them to some of the questions when they went off topic; therefore, a workbook using the same visual prompts as on the tablet was brought along to the second interview for the two young people.

In an attempt to ensure the potential for maximising the young people's voice, pens and blank paper were also provided for the young people, in case they preferred to write or draw some of their responses. Two of the young people

asked to draw a picture of themselves at college at the end of the interview and their drawings of them at school are presented in Appendix D. Related to the findings of the pilot study, the availability of a familiar adult during the interview was offered to all of the young people at both T1 and T2. When asked if they wanted a teaching assistant present to support them with the interviews or to prompt them using Makaton signing, none of the young people requested this support in the first interview. However, in the second interview, two young people requested to have a familiar adult present for their interviews to support them with their Makaton signing.

### **3.9 Choosing a Data Analysis Method**

Several methods of analysis were considered for this study. All of the methods identified reflected the aim of the study; which was to gain an in-depth understanding of the young people's initial college experience. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was initially chosen as the analysis tool, before deciding that thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), would be the most appropriate method of analysis.

Phenomenological approaches such as thematic analysis and IPA often use small sample sizes and focus on capturing rich, detailed data, rather than large quantities of data from multiple sources. IPA differs however, in that in order to enable the researcher to examine commonalities and differences in detail, IPA suggests that its sample is homogenous (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Due to the heterogeneous nature of my sample and the aim of the study, to promote and elicit each young person's inherently different and individual viewpoint, IPA was

not wholly appropriate. A further reason for rejecting IPA as an analysis method related to the level of language used by the young people during the interviews and the level of language required to conduct effective IPA, as described by Smith (1996). Therefore, the option to use IPA was discounted and after further consideration, thematic analysis was chosen as the data analysis method.

Thematic analysis is arguably the most common approach to qualitative data analysis in social science (Holstein & Gubrium, 1994). Thematic analysis has been critiqued in the literature however. Boyatzis (1998) noted that despite thematic analysis being a widely used analytic method, it is a poorly conceptualised and demarcated analytic tool and suggested that thematic analysis is not a specific analytical method but rather a tool to be used across different qualitative methods. Ryan and Bertrand (2000) supported Boyatzis' argument, noting that thematic analysis is a coding process and not a specific qualitative method in its own right. This perhaps related to the argument proposed by Bryman and Burgess (1994), who suggested that thematic analysis lacks guidance for researchers on how to analyse the textual material gathered during data collection.

The lack of clear guidelines around thematic analysis however is regarded as both a strength and limitation of the thematic process. The use of thematic analysis, without commentary on how it should be used, implies and reaffirms the positivist critique of qualitative research; that it is an 'anything goes' approach as noted by Antaki, Billig, Edwards and Potter (2003). However, Braun and Clarke (2006) have stated that one of the benefits of thematic analysis is its flexibility. Thematic analysis, unlike IPA, is not tied to a particular theoretical or

epistemological approach and therefore not confined or limited in its application, providing a flexible and useful analysis strategy.

To acknowledge some of the critiques of the approach, Braun and Clarke (2006) developed a six phase guide to doing thematic analysis, noting that they are not seeking to limit the method's flexibility, but rather provide a framework for "people to start doing thematic analysis in a way that is theoretically and methodologically sound" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p5). The process of analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used in the current study and will be outlined in the next section.

### **3.10 The Process of Thematic Analysis**

Thematic analysis can be an inductive or deductive process. For the purposes of this study, the data will be analysed inductively. The data will be coded without trying to fit it into any pre-existing theory to ensure the findings were completely data driven. The steps outlined in Table 1 were used to guide the inductive analysis of the data generated through the semi-structured interviews. Phases one to five were first completed on the data from the individual cases, before conducting a cross case analysis of the entire dataset. This process helped identify relationships between themes, refine themes and identify exceptional themes from the individual data sets.

**Table 1: The Process of Thematic Analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006)**

Phase	Description of the Process
1. Familiarising yourself with the data	Transcribing interviews, reading and rereading the transcripts, noting down initial ideas
2. Generating initial codes	Coding interesting features of the transcripts in a systematic fashion across the entire collating examples for each code
3. Searching for themes data set	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential link
4. Reviewing themes	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (level 1) and the entire data set (level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis
5. Defining and naming themes	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme
6. Producing the report	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back to the analysis of the research question and literature, producing a report of the analysis

### ***3.10.1 Interpretation and Reporting of the Finding***

Braun and Clarke (2006) suggested reviewing other studies that have used thematic analysis in order to generate questions to ask about data. In doing this, questions about the study's data were developed to further the interpretation beyond a surface level interpretation. The questions included "What does this theme mean?", "What are the assumptions underpinning it?", "Are the implications of this theme and what are they?" and "What have the different themes revealed about the transition experience?" Asking these questions enabled further understanding of the young people's experiences of college.

The analysis is presented as thematic networks, as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) and Attride-Stirling (2001). Both frameworks propose that the

analysis be presented as “thematic networks”, web-like illustrations that summarise the main themes that have been identified in the data. To further clarify to the reader how the transcripts were analysed, Table 2 describes each phase of the Braun and Clarke (2006) framework in relation to the current study.

**Table 2: Phases of the Braun and Clarke Framework (2006) in Relation to the Current Study**

Phase	Links with this study and evidence within the thesis
Familiarising yourself with the data	This was achieved by listening back to the recordings, transcribing the data and reading it several times.
Generating initial codes Searching for themes Reviewing themes	Extracts of a transcript with initial codes highlighted are in the Appendix E. An extract of the initial thematic map used to note down codes and the development of themes are also presented in the Appendix E.  This process of generating themes involved constant reviewing in the analysis phase of the research.
Defining and naming themes	The thematic map presented in the Appendix E shows how the themes from the individual data sets were looked independently and collectively in order to identify the key themes from emerging from the data. The thematic map also considers if and how these themes may be linked.
Producing the report	The findings chapter (Chapter 4) outlines clearly the final overarching themes, main themes and sub-themes arising from the data and links these back directly to data extracts from the transcripts.



### **3.11 Ethical Considerations**

There are a number of ethical issues related to the use of an interview with young people with SLD. Issues of consent, safeguarding and confidentiality, identified in the literature (Lewis, 2002; Silverman, 2010) were considered before beginning with the research and will be discussed in turn. A copy of ethical approval for the study is attached in the Appendix F.

#### ***3.11.1 Obtaining Consent***

Obtaining consent from individuals with SLD to participate in research raised specific ethical challenges. Several studies have considered how to obtain valid consent from individuals with learning and communication difficulties (Cameron & Murphy, 2007; Loyd, 2012; Preece & Jordan, 2010). The British Psychological Society (BPS) (2010) stated that valid ethical consent of vulnerable young people requires "the consent of participants in research, whatever their age or competence, should always be sought, by means appropriate to their age and competence level" (BPS, 2010, p16).

Those with severe learning difficulties are individually different and their understanding and sense making may vary. For this reason, obtaining consent in a conventional way was not appropriate. This however, did not mean that the young people in this study were unable to give their consent. Rather, it emphasised the need to be clear about what young people's participation required and that the young person had the right to withdraw at any point.

The young people's consent also involved the "ongoing process of assent" (BPS, 2010, p17). Several researchers have argued that consent should be obtained initially from individuals with learning and communication difficulties and that the participant's assent and willingness for continued involvement throughout the study should be monitored throughout the study (Beresford, Tozer, Rabiee, & Sloper, 2004; Loyd, 2012). Findings from a study by Loyd (2012) working with young people with limited language ability, proposed that understanding how young people communicate and using means of communication that they were familiar with was central to developing an approach to obtain consent and responses. It was therefore particularly important that the consent form was an accessible document for all the young people participating. The consent form included both symbols and words. Young people were asked to provide their consent by circling "yes" on the consent form. This consent seeking process conformed with Lewis' (2002) conditions for good practice in obtaining consent, in that the young people had the information about the study, knew they had the right to withdraw, understood their role in the study and were aware of what the outcomes were intended to be. As earlier noted a copy of the consent forms and information sheets can be found in the Appendix B.

### ***3.11.2 Safeguarding***

The young people participating were a vulnerable group and so safeguarding was a particularly important issue for this study. The Mental Capacity Act (2005) and its implications were considered before making the decision to include parental consent as part of the study's methodology. The

Mental Capacity Act aims to empower vulnerable young people to make important decisions for themselves. As earlier mentioned, an accessible consent form was therefore important to ensure the young people could provide consent to participate. However, guidelines from the university's research ethics committee indicated that parental consent must also be obtained when vulnerable populations are asked to participate in a research study. This perhaps again relates to the Mental Capacity Act (2005) which also aims to protect young people from making decisions that they cannot fully comprehend. While the consent form was as accessible as possible, adhering to the research ethics committee was required. For this reason, the parents or caregivers of the young people were also approached and informed about the aims and purpose of the study. Their consent was also obtained. There were no foreseeable risks to the participants during the study however, the purpose of the young people's participation was considered at length because they are a vulnerable population. The main benefit of the research was to promote and share the voice of the young people, as members of a minority population with the educational psychology and research communities.

### ***3.11.3 Confidentiality***

The confidentiality of the young people was considered at length as the young people were members of a minority grouping and there was always a possibility because of this, that they could be identified in the data. Lewis (2002), Porter (2003), and Stalker (1998) proposed that it can be difficult to maintain confidentiality when researching small or niche populations, where participants

can be more easily identifiable. Only the first names of the young people were used and the participating FE college was not named. The semi-structured interviews were conducted in private and the concept of confidentiality was explained in accessible terms to the young people. The BPS Guidelines (2010) for ethical practices in psychological research were adhered to, particularly in relation to the safe storage of the young people's data. To ensure the safety and security of the data, it was password protected on a computer hard-drive.

### **3.12 Robustness of Design**

Yardley (2008) argued that "it is essential for qualitative researchers to be able to show that their studies are sound, rigorous, and yield findings that are as valuable as those from quantitative research" (Yardley, 2008, p238). Establishing validity and reliability in qualitative research project has always been problematic. A number of guidelines for evaluating validity have been developed by qualitative research psychology (Elliott, Fischer, & Rennie, 1999; Stiles, 1993; Yardley, 2000, 2008). For the purposes of the current study, reference is made to Yardley's (2008) four key principles of evaluating validity and reliability. These are: sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, coherence and transparency, impact and importance. Each will be discussed in turn in relation to the current study.

### ***3.12.1 Sensitivity to Context***

Yardley (2008) described how sensitivity to context could be established by awareness of pre-existing theoretical and empirical literature. This was encouraged by creating research questions that derived from gaps identified in the literature, rather than through “rediscovering what is already known” (Yardley, 2008, p237). Sensitivity to context was also established by respecting all perspectives gained in the data and by maintaining awareness about the socio-cultural context of the interviewed participants. The study remained sensitive to the data by giving the participants a voice through using verbatim extracts throughout the findings chapter.

### ***3.12.2 Commitment and Rigour***

Yardley (2008) stated that engaging with the research topic and building confidence and skills in data collection and analysis could enforce commitment and rigour. In response to this, the data collected was coded and then reviewed and coded again by a peer. This process is known as inter-rater reliability (Boyatzis, 1998). Approximately 80% of the codes were agreed upon with disagreements about codes resolved through discussion.

To further promote rigour within the current study, the data was also subjected to member checking. Member checking refers to the practice of checking the analysis with participants. For the purposes of this study, member checking was conducted at the second interview by presenting the young people with a draft of the themes identified from their first interview. Member checking

was carried out firstly to avoid any misrepresentations of the young people's views, and secondly to establish the credibility and quality of the analysis. The findings and emerging themes from the first interview were shared with the young people at the start of their second interview. Their opinions and perspectives of their initial college experience were further explored with them, with amendments made whenever the young people suggested that the findings from the first interview required re-conceptualising or re-interpretation.

### ***3.12.3 Coherence and Transparency***

Yardley (2008) stated that the principle of transparency incorporates the researcher's reflexivity throughout their study. The researcher attempted to remain reflexive throughout the design, data collection, analysis and discussion stages of the study. Reflexivity is further discussed later in the chapter. Transparency was promoted by outlining the methodology with as much clarity as possible. Examples of the data analysis process are presented in the Appendices to support the study's claims of coherency and transparency.

### ***3.12.4 Impact and Importance***

Yardley (2008) argued that the impact and importance of a study are the most significant components of critiquing a piece of research. The discussion chapter aimed to outline how this study's findings contribute to the body of literature in the field. It provided deeper insight into the experiences of young people with SLD.

The role of the EP was considered and implications for how professionals could work more sensitively with these young people experiencing the transition to FE.

### ***3.12.5 Reflexivity***

As earlier mentioned in relation to sensitivity to context, reflexivity in research, particularly qualitative research, is important as it acknowledges the role of the researcher in the production of knowledge. It is necessary to acknowledge the assumptions and beliefs the researcher has brought to the study and consider how this may have influenced their interpretations. Reflexivity allows the researcher to reflect on their personal reactions and position in relation to the research (Braun & Clarke, 2013; McLeod, 2001; Willig, 2001).

As a trainee EP, I have been encouraged over the last three years to explore and evolve my thinking about the role of the EP and have identified elements of the role which are and will be essential to my personal practice. Eliciting the young person's voice has become central to how I work as an EP. The views and opinions of each young person I work with have become fundamental to how I assess and report the feedback my involvement. I seek always to actively encourage and promote the voice of vulnerable young people of my work with parents, schools and in multi-agency environments.

Young people with SLD are a steadily increasing population as indicated earlier, and in the borough where I work there are two SLD provisions; however little appears known about these young people and how best to support them, particularly during times of transition. I have personally been influenced by the impact of transition, moving to the UK three years ago to take up my place on the

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EP training programme. The experience included separating from friends and family and voicing feelings of excitement and apprehension before the move. My own experiences led me to wonder what the young people in the current study were feeling and thinking about transitioning from a familiar environment to college and also how their own views on the transition had been elicited and listened to.



## 4. FINDINGS

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In this chapter the findings relating to Research Questions 1 and 2 are reported following cross case and individual case thematic analysis, together with illustrative verbatim responses from the young people. As previously indicated, a total of nine interviews were completed with five young people, four of whom were interviewed twice, with one young person being unavailable for the follow up interview. The interviews took place early in September and again immediately after the half-term in November. The timings of the interviews are identifiable as T1 (time 1) and T2 (time 2).

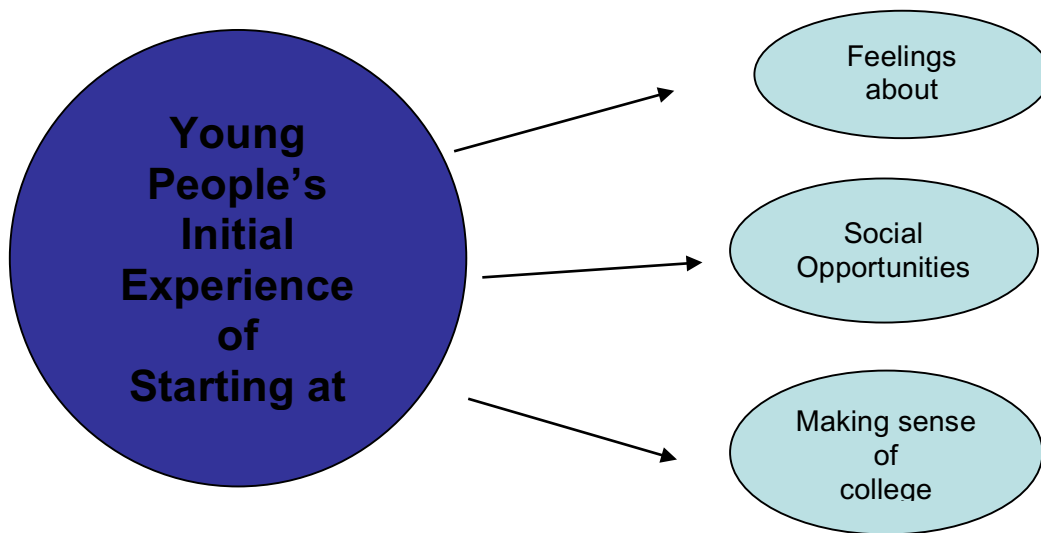
### 4.1 Cross Case Findings for Research Question 1: How do young people experience the initial transition to FE?

A cross case matrix was produced to allow “a quick analysis down rows and across columns to see what jumps out” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p.242). The cross case matrix made it possible to compare the data from the five young people. The matrix was used to identify super-ordinate themes and sub-themes. It is presented below as Figure 1. Figure 2 which follows immediately afterward Figure 1 is a diagrammatical representation of the overarching theme and sub-themes identified for Research Question 1. Braun and Clarke (2006) suggested using thematic maps in the third stage of their framework for thematic analysis to clearly represent emerging themes from the data. Smaller, specific thematic maps related to the research questions will be used throughout the findings

chapter to best outline the themes derived for the cross case and individual findings for Research Question 1 and Research Question 2.

**Figure 1: Super-ordinate and Sub-themes for Research Question 1:**

Super-ordinate Themes	Sub-ordinate Themes	Lydia	Rema	Matthew	Lee	Jordan
<b>College Opportunity</b> as	Educational Value	✓		✓	✓	
	Social Opportunity	✓		✓	✓	
<b>Feelings Influence Experience</b>	Feelings before beginning college	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Positive Feelings after starting college	✓		✓	✓	✓
<b>Comparisons with School</b>	Linking school experience to FE experiences	✓			✓	✓
<b>Understanding of college</b>	Physical College Layout	✓		✓	✓	✓
	Awareness of college routine and curriculum			✓	✓	✓
	Knowing why they are at college	✓		✓	✓	

**Figure 2: Thematic Map of the Cross Case findings for Research Question 1**

One overarching theme and three sub-themes were developed in the cross case findings to answer Research Question 1. The overarching theme was entitled as the “Initial Experiences of the Young People on Starting College”. “Feelings about College”, “Making Sense of the College Experience” and “Social Opportunities” were identified as the three sub-themes running across all, or the majority of the young people’s accounts. Each of the sub-themes will be discussed in turn.

#### ***4.1.1 Sub-theme 1: Feelings about college***

All five young people reported strong feelings associated with their experience of starting college. The feelings were both positive and negative and the young people reported their feelings before beginning college as well as their feelings once they had started. Two of the five young people recalled feeling sad

or scared before beginning at college, but reported more positive reactions to college once they had begun there.

"I felt scared because, because it's my first year here...I was excited. But just a little bit scared because it's my first year here." (Lydia, T1)

"Me, me feel sad." (Rema, T1)

All of the young people reported at both T1 and T2 positive feelings about college since they started at college in September.

"I feel happy at college." (Matthew, T1)

"I feel happy. I feel heaven." (Rema, T1)

"It was like fantastico." (Jordan, T1)

Three out of the five young people also shared their feelings about what college meant for them, citing college as an important educational experience.

"It's college. It's... learning. That's good." (Rema, T1)

"I made all new friends. And I learn the drums, do jobs, learn the computers. Learn a lot here really." (Lydia, T1)

"To learn...photocopying and get a good job." (Lee, T1)

#### **4.1.2 Sub-theme 2: Social opportunities**

Four out of five young people reported that college provided them with a wider social network of friends and social opportunities. All four could name friends readily and cited friendship as one of their favourite aspects of the college experience.

"Why do you like it? I like it... I like college...friends... Here. [*names the college provision*]." (Matthew, T1)

"I've made new friends here. I have lots of new friends here." (Lydia, T1)

When asked what her favourite thing about college, Rema replied "Friends...Yes. Friends." (Rema, T1)

#### **4.1.3 Sub-theme 3: Making sense of the college experience**

All five young people talked about their experiences of their previous school setting when asked about their experience of college. They made sense of their college environment and experience by making links between their experiences at school and their experiences at college. To help explain their experience of college, all the young people made comparisons between their old school setting and college, identifying aspects that were the same or different.

"It's the same as school but some of it is different. The rooms have changed." (Jordan, T1)

"Same. Same here, same here, same here. Classroom is different. School." (Matthew, T1)

"Not a lot has changed. Computers are the same."

"There's no library at [*names old school*]. And... we weren't allowed to use the photocopier." (Lee, T1).

"College is much better than school. It's different. Yes. It's just changed." (Lydia, T1)

When discussing their experience of starting at college at both T1 and T2 all five of the young people described the physical layout of college and demonstrated an awareness of their college routine, including the curriculum and timetable.

"It's big. There's a lot of chairs and enough for people. We get drinks in the morning. I come in here... to play the drums. At lunch time I play the drums. It's good." (Lydia, T1)

"ICT and English. And Maths. Maths is a bit challenging." (Jordan, T1)

"Thursday is my favourite day because I get to go to the library at break." (Lee, T2)

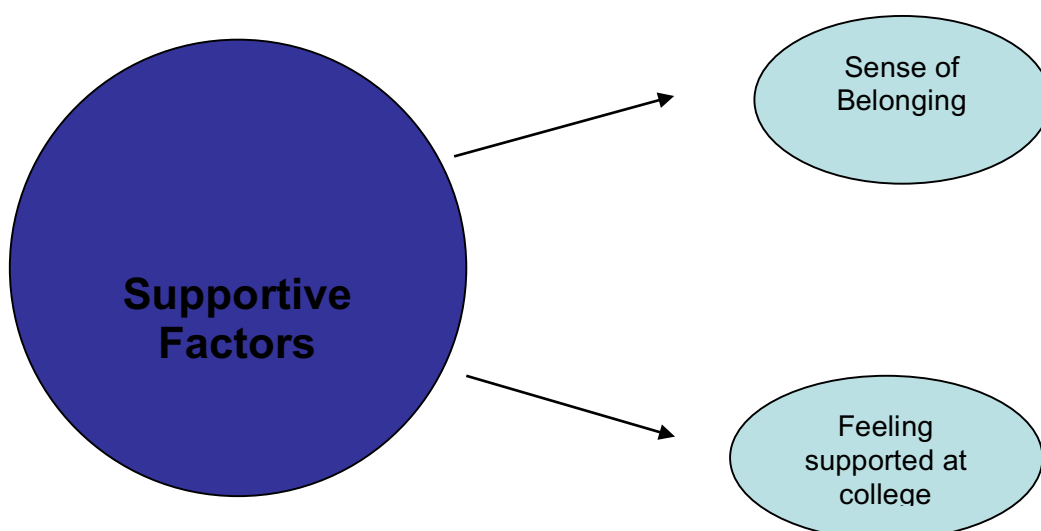
#### 4.2 Cross Case Findings for Research Question 2: What did the young people identify as supportive and challenging factors when beginning college?

Two over-arching themes were developed in response to Research Question 2. These were “Supportive Factors” and “Challenging Factors”. Two sub-themes were identified for both overarching themes. Each sub-theme will be discussed in turn.

##### 4.2.1 *Supportive Factors*

“Sense of belonging” and “Feeling supported at college” were the sub-themes identified across the data as supportive factors identified by the young people in their move to college.

**Figure 3: Thematic Map of Cross Case Findings for Research Question 2: Supportive Factors**



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### 4.2.1.1 *Sub-theme 1: Sense of belonging*

Four young people talked about feeling like they belonged at college. They recalled feeling welcomed and included at college and found the inclusive ethos to be a supportive factor in helping them to settle. One young person described his initial college experience as being like in a new family.

"What's good? They make you feel welcome and it's ok." (Jordan, T1).

"Welcome. Seeing new people and Kitkats."

"People said hello. Even Julie said hello. Was nice." (Lee, T1)

"Welcome. Matthew at [*names the college*]. Yes..." (Matthew, T1)

"Since I came here, everyone is nice to me." (Lydia, T1)

### 4.2.1.2 *Sub-theme 2: Feeling supported at college*

All five young people could identify people who had helped them when they started at college at T1 and T2. The college staff particularly the teaching staff, were cited by all the young people as a supportive factor for them in their early college experience.

"Erm.. the teachers. They're very nice and helpful and that's good for me." (Lydia, T1)

"The teachers help me. Understanding and that." (Jordan, T1)

Feeling supported at college also included having a familiar young person to transition with. At T1, four out of the five young people identified this as an important supportive factor. At T2, none of the young people made reference to the young people they had initially transitioned with, citing new friendships as their supportive network.

"Yes I knew people here but also different people here." (Lydia, T1)

"I'm not too sure. The tall guy went to [*names old school*]." (Jordan, T1)

"From [*names old school*]? Yeah. I. And A did, but I think she's gone now." (Lee, T1)

Family support was also identified by four of the young people as an important factor in their transition to and early experiences of college. At T1, the young people reported that their family and parents had had a role in making decisions about going to college. Added to this, the young people were also acutely aware of their parents' feelings about them at college and found their support and encouragement important in their start in college.

"Dad liked it here." (Lee, T1)

"My mum. She tried the college and said it's ok." (Jordan, T1)

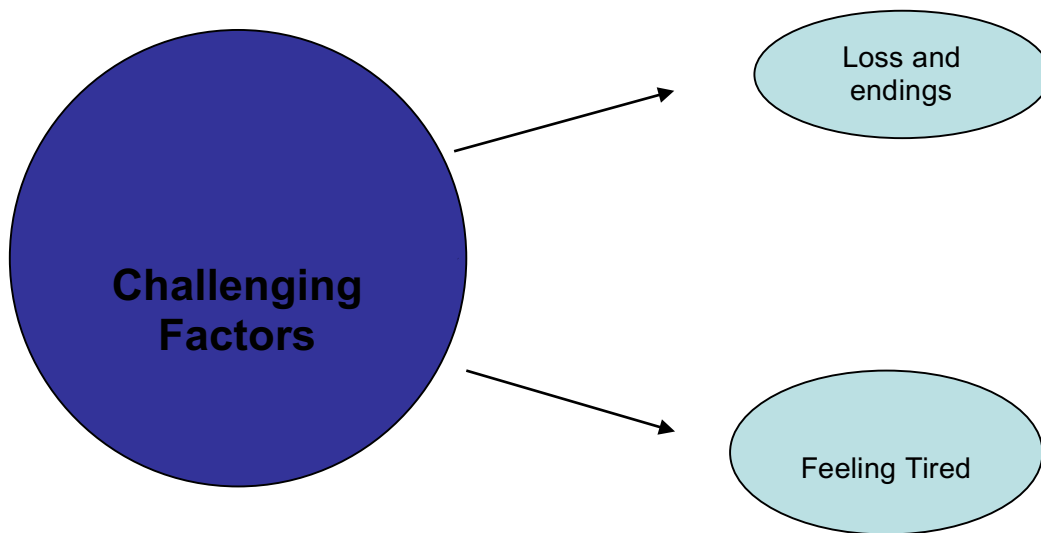
"... I didn't look there. I didn't visit there. My mum didn't want me to look at [*names provision in another borough*]. So my mum wanted to put me here. And I feel fine about it and I'm happy about it." (Lydia, T1)

#### **4.2.2 Challenging Factors**

Two sub-themes emerged across the young people's responses as challenging factors. These were "Loss and Endings" and "Feeling Tired". Each sub-theme will be discussed in succession.



**Figure 4: Thematic Map of Cross Case Findings for Research Question 2: Challenging Factors**



#### 4.2.2.1 Sub-theme 1: Loss and endings

At T1, three of the five young people reported experiencing lost friendships, being unsure of where their friends from school were now or being unclear about why their friends were not at college with them.

"I don't see them. I didn't see them." (Lee, T1)

"I miss my old school now. I still miss it here. Because my friends are over there and all my teachers and I don't get to see them. I miss my friends and teachers. And I don't get to see them anymore. On Friday I went over to the school, to see people and my friends." (Lydia, T1)

All five of the young people also discussed their feelings about leaving school and the ending itself. Two of the young people had a strong sense that it was necessary to leave school and move on to college, one recalled their end of school assembly and the other spoke about it being time to leave school and begin at college.

"Why? College... left at school. Yes time...college. Left at school. Friends". (Matthew, T1)

"And then we had a big assembly. All my pictures were there. Every pictures. And I was upset and mum was crying. Crying because I was leaving." (Lydia, T1)

#### 4.2.2.2 Sub-theme 2: *Feeling tired*

At T1, tiredness emerged strongly from the data as a challenging factor to the college experience. Four out of the five young people identified the length of the college day as a negative impact on their college experience. At T2, none of the young people reported feeling tired at college.

"But when I come in, in the morning I get tired. Because this is college." (Lydia, T1)

"Em... [yawning] At college, I tired." (Rema, T1)

### 4.3 Individual Case Findings

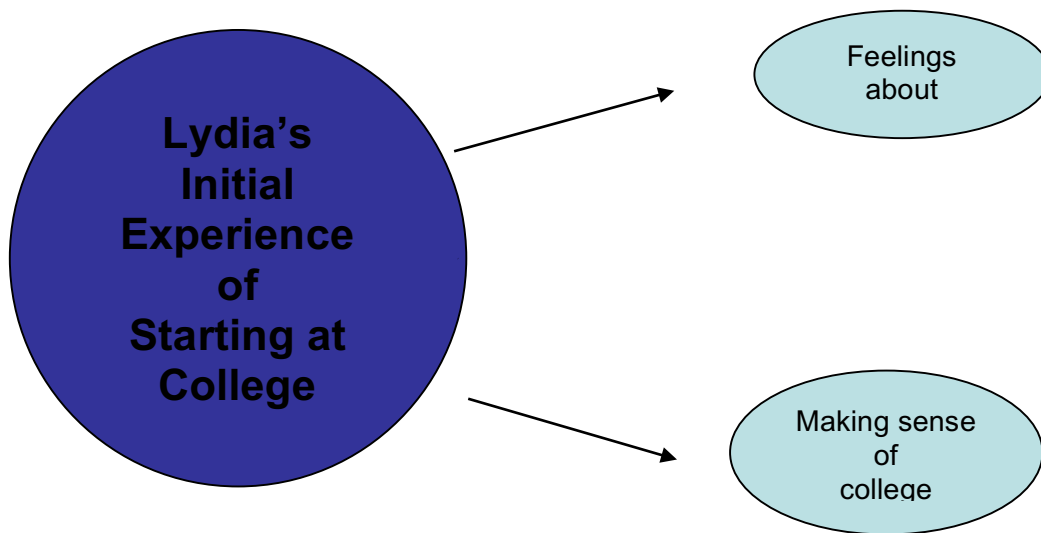
All five young people's data were considered separately in response to Research Questions 1 and 2. The overarching themes and sub-themes for each young person are depicted below.

#### LYDIA

#### 4.4 Research Question 1: How did Lydia experience the initial transition to college?

One overarching theme and two sub-themes were developed from Lydia's responses. "Initial experiences at starting college" was the overarching theme. "Feelings about college" and "Making sense of college" were identified as the sub-themes. Both will be discussed in turn.

**Figure 5: Thematic Map of findings for Lydia in relation to Research Question 1**



#### **4.4.1 Sub-theme 1: Feelings about college**

Lydia reported feeling a range of emotions about college. She recalled feeling more negative emotions prior to starting at college and linked her negative feelings to her sadness about leaving a school she enjoyed very much. Lydia talked about how these feelings changed when she started college.

"I felt scared because, because it's my first year here...I was excited. But just a little bit scared because it's my first year here." (T1)

"Everything is good and I'm loving it. It's new... and I love it." (T1)

Linked to feelings about college, Lydia was acutely aware of her mother's feelings and anxieties about college. She reported in detail how her mother felt at the end of Lydia's time at school and as she began college. Lydia loosely linked her mother's feelings to her own initial feelings about college.

"Yes, when I came here first, my mum was worried about me and I said mum, I'm fine. I go to college." (T1)

"She was worried because the college is new and I'm on my own." (T1)

#### 4.4.1.2 Sub-theme 2: Making sense of college

Lydia made sense of her college experience by drawing comparisons between her old school and college. She also discussed concrete elements of her college experience, such as the classroom layout and her college timetable.

"College is much better than school." (T1)

"It's big. There's a lot of chairs and enough for people. We get drinks in the morning. I come in here...to play the drums. At lunch time I play the drums. It's good." (T1)

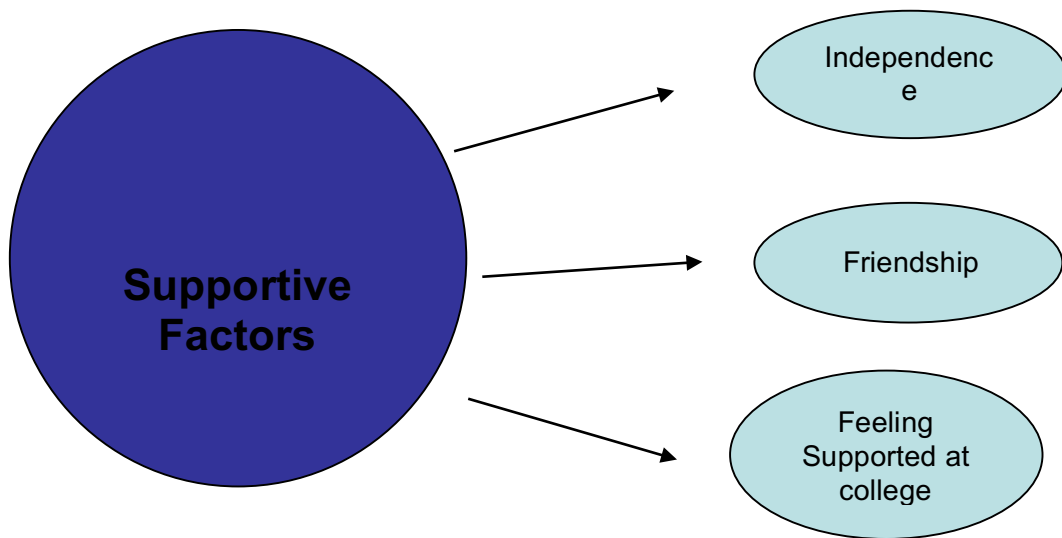
"Model making, print papers and when we do work on the computer. Sometimes we do print papers. I do that. After that we have lunch, after that we come back. Here. Sometimes we leave the room. Go out... we go to Richmond or we play the drums (T1).

### 4.5 Research Question 2: What did Lydia identify as challenging and supportive factors in her transition to college?

Two overarching themes were developed to answer Research Question 2 for Lydia. These were "Supportive Factors" and "Challenging Factors". Sub-themes were also developed for each theme and will be discussed in turn.

#### 4.5.1 Supportive Factors

The sub-themes identified for Lydia as supportive factors in her initial experience of college were "Independence", "Friendship" and "Feeling supported at college".

**Figure 6: Thematic Map of findings for Lydia in relation to Research****Question 2: Supportive Factors****4.5.1.1 Sub-theme 1: Independence**

Lydia made reference on several occasions during interview to college offering her the opportunity to be more independent. Lydia talked of being able to do things more autonomously at college compared to when she is at home. Lydia noted that she is considered too young to be able to do things at home and linked college with being more adult.

“Yes see at home, she goes shopping with all the family and I was in the house with the dog. But she didn’t want to let me stay on my own. She thinks I’m young enough you see. She says get dressed and come with me. So I get dressed and go with her.” (T1)

“We go over to the canteen and have lunches by ourselves.” (T1)

“She, my mum, she worries about me. She thinks I’m not old enough.” (T1)

**4.5.1.2 Sub-theme 2: Friendship**

Lydia was only interviewed at T1 and reported on the friendships she had made at college since beginning two weeks prior to the interview taking place. Despite

this, friendships were a strong theme in Lydia's responses. She reported having made new friends since starting at college and new friendships were a favourite aspect of her initial college experience.

"I've made new friends here. I have lots of new friends here." (T1)

"I know Jordan. He's a big boy. There's him. I said hi and does he need help. I like him. Yeah and I said it was nice to see him. And he said I look very nice and I said you look very handsome. But it was strange. But good." (T1)

Lydia also made reference to friends that had made the transition to college with her. Having someone familiar to experience the change with also appeared to be a supportive factor for Lydia.

"R's my number one friend here. We were at school together..." (T1).

"J is here. I know him. Because I know him long, because you see J lives by me." (T1)

#### 4.5.1.3 Sub-theme 3: *Feeling supported at college*

Feeling supported at college was something Lydia made strong reference to in interview. Lydia noted that support from her college teacher had helped her to settle at college. She was also aware of the support she had received from other members of the teaching staff at the college.

"Who helps me? Craig helps me. Sometimes he helps me in class when we do work." (T1)

"Craig is ok. But Francesca helps me a lot and Craig does help me a lot." (T1)

Family support was also a real positive factor for Lydia in her transition. Whilst she noted that her family were upset when she was leaving school, she understood clearly why they were upset and stated that she felt supported by her whole family.

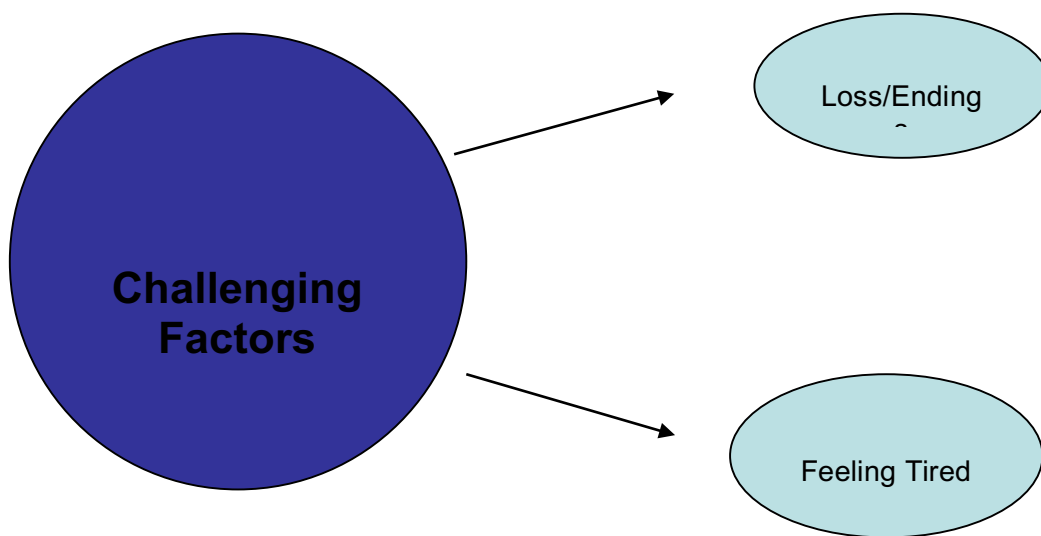
But they all happy. They know. They know I here. They know it's good, everything's well. Every week goes good." (T1)

"My mum came here to visit. So the first one. She didn't like [names provision in another borough]. It far out in [names another borough]. She said no I'm not sending Lydia there. She wanted something in [names borough]. So we came here. And we visited here and she was fine about it, she was happy about it. I was happy about that. I didn't look there. I didn't visit there. My mum didn't want me to look at [names provision in another borough]. So my mum wanted to put me here. And I feel fine about it and I'm happy about it." (T1)

#### 4.5.2 Challenging Factors

Two sub-themes were identified as challenging factors for Lydia in her initial experience of college. They were "Loss and endings" and "Feeling tired".

**Figure 7: Thematic Map of findings for Lydia in relation to Research Question 2: Challenging Factors**



##### 4.5.2.1 Sub-theme 1: Loss and endings

Loss was a strong sub-theme in Lydia's interview data. She discussed at length how losing contact with her friends from her old school had been a particularly challenging experience for her, both emotionally and socially.

"So when I left school and I come here L said I can come visit him because he misses me. He misses me and I miss him." (T1)

"I miss my friends. Do you know R? I miss him. But he's not coming here. He's not here now. He's at [*names provision in another borough*]. Do you know what [*names provision in another borough*] is? It's a big college and at first I cried to mum. And then my mum, she said why don't you meet him. Outside. We could take him for lunch somewhere. So we're going to do that. It's fine." (T1)

"Because I miss my friends. My old friends. My old teachers." (T1)

Lydia also acknowledged the loss she experienced at leaving her old school. She found the move away challenging and talked about how it had impacted greatly on her emotionally. Lydia also showed an awareness that her time school was ending and it was necessary to leave.

"Because they know that I'm leaving school. And because it's ten years. I've been there ten years." (T1)

"And the first, a different time I came here with my teacher. To visit here. And then. In the term. I came here and it was fine." (T1)

#### 4.5.2.2 *Sub-theme 2: Feeling tired*

Lydia reported feeling more tired at college, citing changes such as a new college routine and travel time as causes. She noted that the tiredness had impacted on how she engaged with college and remained something she was adjusting to.

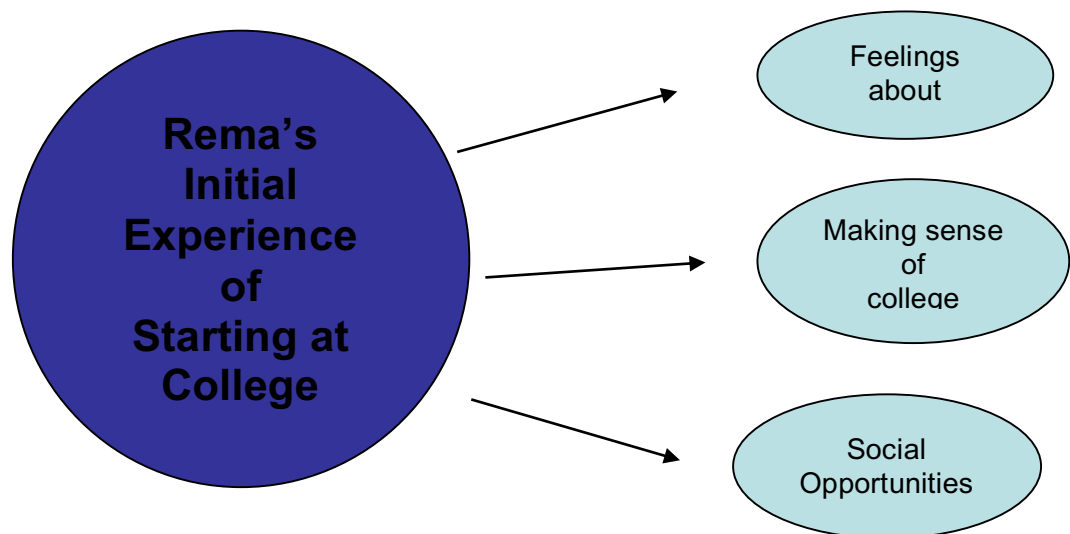
"But when I come in, in the morning I get tired. Because this college. When it came to school time, I get up at 9 but at college I have to get up at 8 o'clock. It's a longer day and I get tired because it's a longer day." (T1)



**REMA****4.6 Research Question 1: How did Rema experience the initial transition to college?**

In response to Research Question 1, one overarching theme and three sub-themes were identified in Rema's interviews. The overarching theme was Initial Experience of College. The sub-themes were "Feelings about college", "Making sense of college" and "Social opportunities." Each sub-theme will be discussed in turn.

**Figure 8: Thematic Map of Findings for Rema in Relation to Research Question 1**

**4.6.1 Sub-theme 1: Feelings about college**

Rema talked about her feelings at leaving school and starting college, at both T1 and T2. At T1, Rema expressed her upset about leaving school; however, she did not mention school in her second interview at T2. Rema also talked about

how her feelings about college had changed once she started, noting that she would be crying when it was time to leave college.

"Why? Because I am happy here. Not sad coming to college." (T1).

"I feel happy, I feel heaven." (T1)

#### 4.6.2 Sub-theme 2: Making sense of college

Rema made sense of her initial experience at college by talking about concrete college aspects, such as her timetable, subjects she enjoyed and the size of the college classroom.

"Classroom? It is big. L, P, C in my class." (T1)

"Stay here. Lunch. Eat. Yes and colour in and I make cards and cakes. And yes I'm doing cooking at college." (T1)

"Cooking, working... colouring... computers." (T2)

Rema also expressed her understanding of what she thought the value of college was. For Rema, college was understood as an opportunity for further learning.

"It's college... It's learning." (T1)

"College... um... working. Yeah working hard here. Learning." (T1)

#### 4.6.3 Sub-theme 3: Social opportunities

Rema noted that moving to college provided her with the opportunity to make new friends. She was aware that she had left friends at school but had made new ones since starting in college in September. Extending her social circle at college was one of Rema's favourite things about the college experience.

"Favourite thing? Friends here." (T1)

"Here. New friends here at college. Em...Lydia, Matthew. College friends." (T1)

"Yes. F, J, L. My friends here at college." (T2)

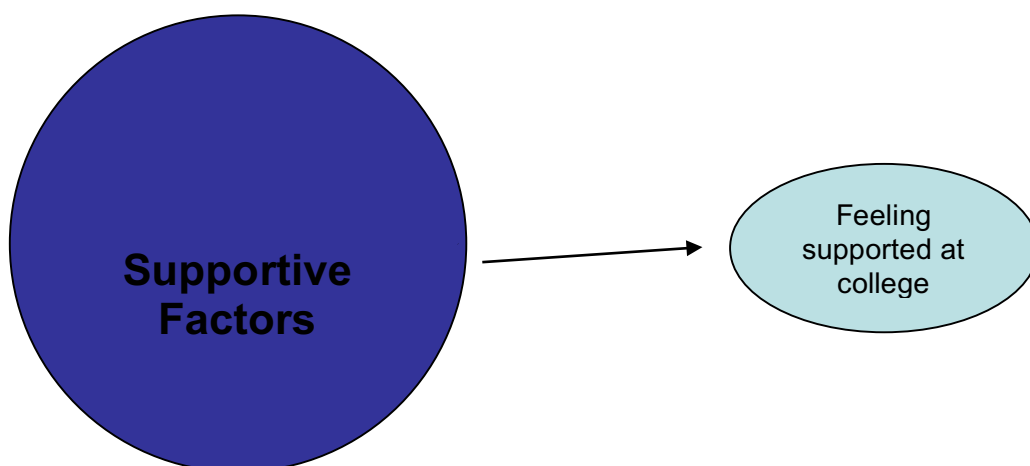
#### **4.7 Research Question 2: What did Rema identify as challenging and supportive factors in her transition to college?**

There were two overarching themes developed in response to Research Question 2: "Supportive factors" and "Challenging factors". Sub-themes were also identified and will be discussed in turn.

##### **4.7.1 Supportive Factors**

One sub-theme was identified in the data for Rema: "Feeling supported at college". It is illustrated below in Figure 9.

**Figure 9: Thematic Map of findings for Rema in relation to Research Question 2: Supportive Factors**



4.7.1.1 *Sub-theme 1: Feeling supported at college*

Rema emphasised in both her interviews that she felt supported at college. She identified college staff as an important support network in her transition to college and could describe how she had been supported by them.

"Craig. With my work. With the computer." (T1)

"College is fun, teachers here are good. Help me." (T1)

"Craig and Francesca help me work." (T2)

At T1, Rema also reported that knowing someone at college had helped her with her move to college. At T2, Rema reported a larger social network and new friendships and did name the young person from T1 as one of her friends in the second interview.

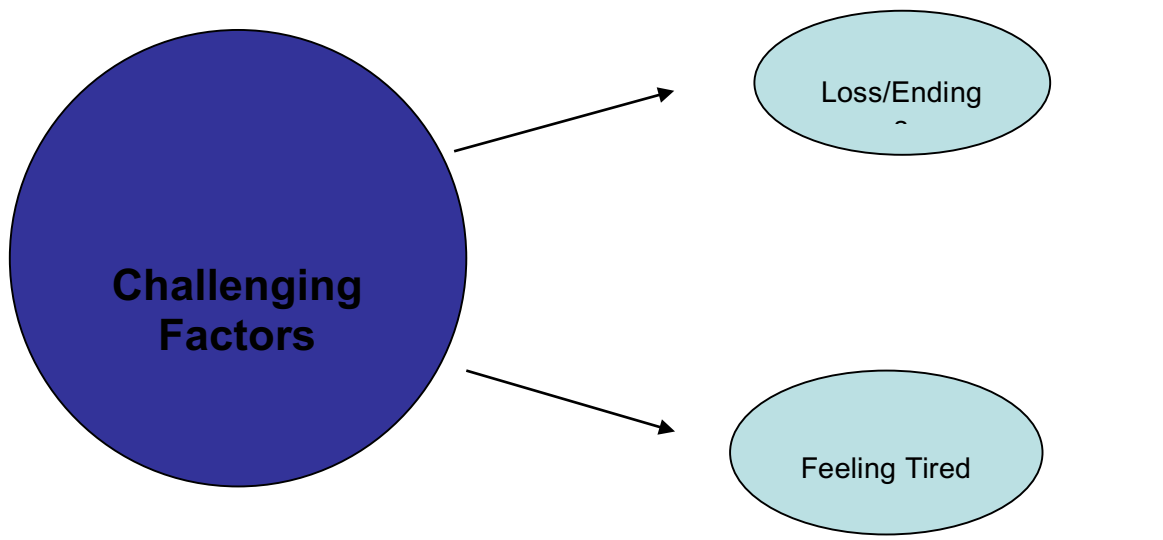
"I came to college with L." (T1)

"L was sad. She's my friend here." (T1).

**4.7.2 Challenging Factors**

Two sub-themes were developed as challenging factors from Rema's interview data. They were entitled "Loss and endings" and "Feeling tired" and are illustrated in Figure 10 (below). Both sub-themes are discussed in turn.

**Figure 10: Thematic Map of findings for Rema in relation to Research Question 2: Challenging Factors**



#### 4.7.2.1 Sub-theme 1: Loss and endings

Separation from friends and moving away from her old school were two significant losses that Rema reported experiencing in her initial transition to college. At T1, Rema spoke about not knowing why her old friends could not be at college with her. At T2 however, Rema did not mention the peers she missed in the first interview.

"A lot. A. I'm going to see her. Going to go to school. I miss A." (T1)

"Me, me feel sad"

"Yes I miss A. I miss her"

"She is at my school." (T1)

"F is scared. She can't come to college. She love and be here at college. Here at college. F and me. [pause] What's your name again?" "Siobhan, pick up your phone and say F, come to my college." (T1)

4.7.2.2 Sub-theme 2: *Feeling tired*

Rema noted that she was feeling tired at college, yawning on occasion and reporting that she had to get up early to come to college. She also felt that the day at college was long.

"Em... [yawning] At college, I tired." (T1)

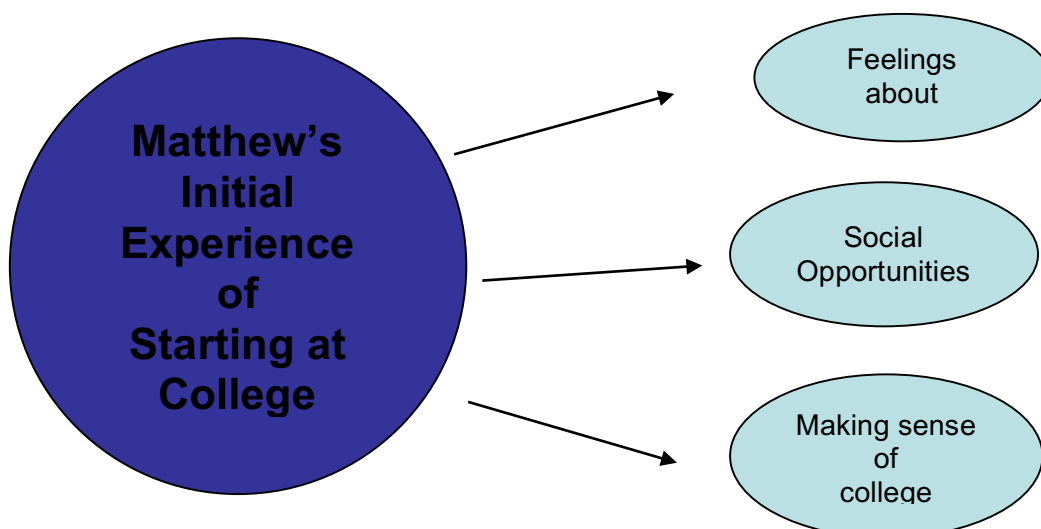
"Yes. Have to go to sleep and get up early. College is... long. Yes. College. Tired here." (T1)

**MATTHEW**

**4.8 Research Question 1: how did Matthew experience the initial transition to college?**

To answer Research Question 1 for Matthew, one overarching theme was developed. This was "Initial experiences of starting college". Three sub-themes were identified; "Making sense of college", "Feelings about college" and "Social opportunities". Each of the sub-themes are discussed in turn.

**Figure 11: Thematic Map of findings for Matthew in relation to Research Question**



#### **4.8.1 Sub-theme 1: Feelings about college**

Matthew described his transition experience as a largely positive one. In both interviews at T1 and T2 Matthew shared how he felt about his early college experiences.

"Excited. College. Yes, excited." (T1)

"I feel happy at college." (T1)

"... I like college. Happy." (T2)

#### **4.8.2 Sub-theme 2: Social opportunities**

The social aspect of college was strongly referenced across both of Matthew's interviews. He described college as an opportunity to extend his circle of friends, naming his new friends and citing these new friendships as one of his favourite things about college.

"Like. College. Like class, friends." (T1)

"College? Friends? J, V, L... J and R." (T1)

"New friends here. That's good." (T1)

"L, P, J, R, V. J and J. Friends. More friends. More friends. A" (T2)

#### **4.8.3 Sub-theme 3: Making sense of college**

Matthew's understanding of college at T1 centred around the college's more concrete features, such as the college layout and daily routine.

"...Garden room, Mountain room, Sky room, college." (T1)

"Monday to Thursday. College... Friday is day off." (T1)

At T2, when asked about college, Matthew listed subjects in the college curriculum to describe his understanding of college. He identified subjects he

both liked and disliked and had an in-depth understanding of the college routine and timetable.

"Yes. I don't like cross code safety. I don't like it." (T2)

"College office. Shredding. Yes and photocopying, cooking." (T2)

"ICT. I don't like ICT." (T2)

"...Thursday is swimming." (T2)

#### **4.9 Research Question 2: What did Matthew identify as challenging and supportive factors in his transition to college?**

To answer Research Question 2 for Matthew, two overarching themes were identified, "Supportive Factors" and "Challenging Factors". Four sub-themes were identified as supportive factors and one sub-theme was developed as a challenging factor. Each sub-theme will be discussed in turn.

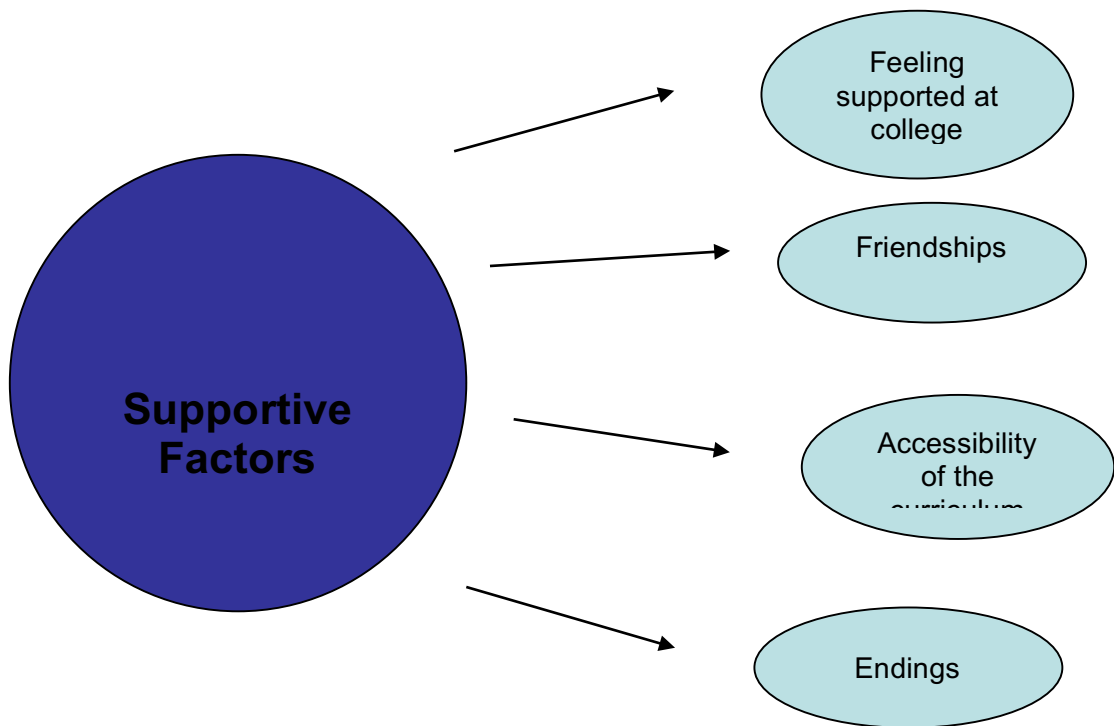
##### ***4.9.1 Supportive Factors***

Four sub-themes were identified. They are "Feeling supported", "Friendships", "Accessibility of the Curriculum" and "Endings". The overarching theme and sub-themes are illustrated below in Figure 12. Each sub-theme will be discussed in turn.



**Figure 12: Thematic Map of findings for Matthew in relation to Research**

**Question 2: Supportive Factors**



**4.9.1.2 Sub-theme 1: Feeling supported at college**

Matthew was aware of the support available to him at college at T1 and T2. At T1, Matthew named one person that he felt was helpful to him at college; however at T2, his support network at college had extended and he had a

“Help at college?” Matthew. People. People. Garden room. Craig.” (T2)

“Everyone. Everyone else... helps Matthew... college.” (T2)

**4.9.1.3 Sub-theme 2: Friendships**

Matthew reported knowing one person when he arrived at college; however, the opportunity to develop new friendships at college was something

Matthew repeated in both his interviews as an important aspect to being at college.

"Yes. Friend. Yes. School. Friend. Here." (T1)

"... New friends here." (T1).

"New friends here. That's good." (T2)

#### 4.9.1.4 *Sub-theme 3: Accessibility of the curriculum*

Matthew noted subjects he both enjoyed and disliked. He showed an understanding of the content of his subjects and could recall tasks associated with certain subjects in his timetable. Matthew noted that the accessibility of the college curriculum and broad range of subjects contributed to the positive feelings he was experiencing about his time at college.

"College. Yes. It is. Easy. English, maths. Yes... easy... college...Good" (T1).

#### 4.9.1.5 *Sub-theme 4: Endings*

Matthew reported no feelings of missing his old school at T1 or T2. The ending of school and starting at college appeared to be a positive for Matthew. Matthew's responses suggest that he was very clear that it was time to move on from school.

"School. College. School? Miss. No." (T1)

"Yes. Time... college. Left at school..." (T1)

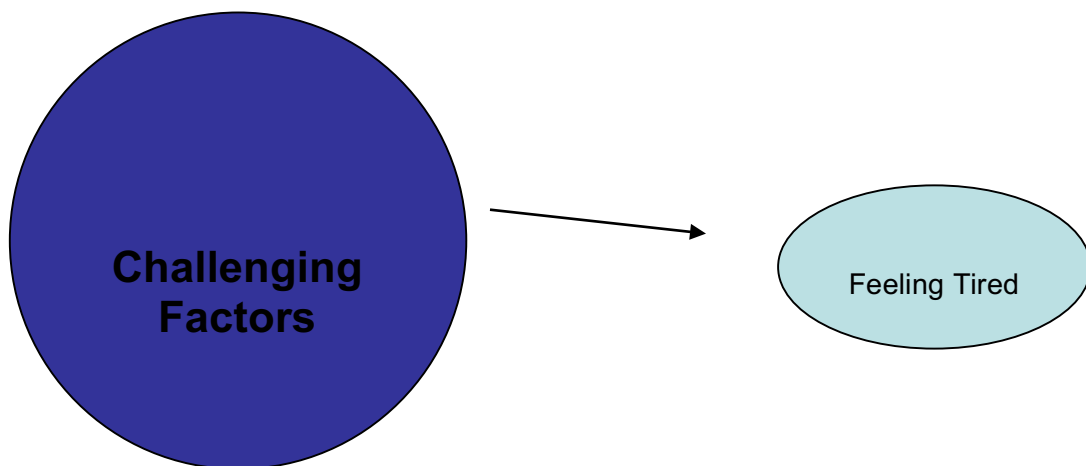
"Yes goodbye friends. Goodbye to friends. College... now (inaudible) Yes. Hello to college. Hello to college. Hello to friends." (T1).

"Yes. Left school. [pause] time... left school. Time." (T2)

#### 4.9.2 Challenging Factors

One sub-theme was identified as a challenging factor from Matthew's responses. This was named "Feeling tired".

**Figure 13: Thematic Map of findings for Matthew in relation to Research Question 2: Challenging Factors**



##### 4.9.2.1 Sub-theme 1: *Feeling tired*

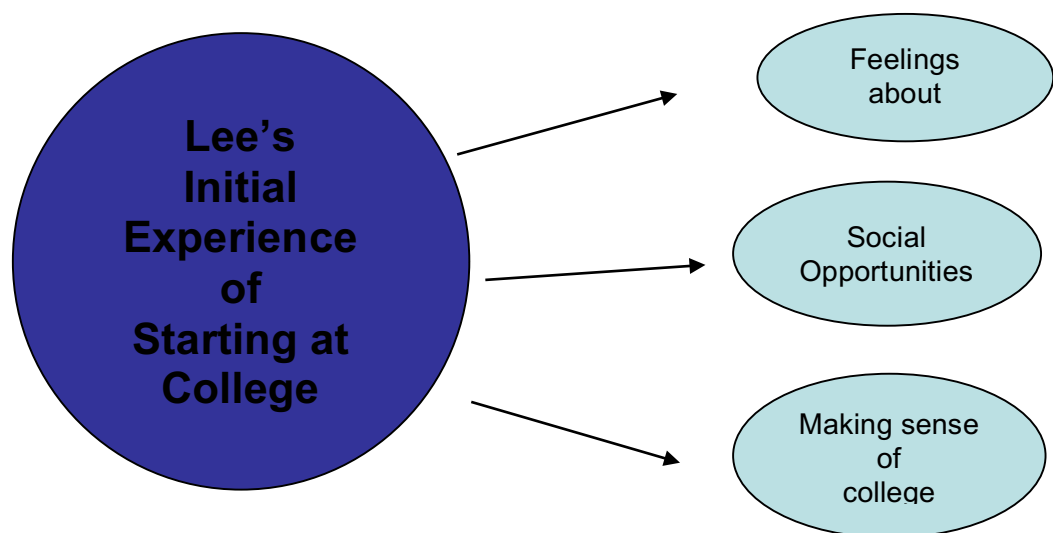
At T1, Matthew talked about the length of the college day as something he disliked about his college experience. At T2, he did not report tiredness as an ongoing difficulty in college.

"College. Not like. Not like? College. Long" (T1).
--

**LEE****4.10 Research Question 1: how did Lee experience the initial transition to college?**

One overarching theme and three sub-themes were developed from Lee's responses. The overarching theme was "Initial experiences of starting college". The overarching theme and sub-themes are illustrated in Figure 14 (below). The three sub-themes will be discussed in turn.

**Figure 14: Thematic Map of findings for Lee in relation to Research Question 1.**

**4.10.1 Sub-theme 1: Feelings about college**

Lee recognised that his initial feelings about college were influential in how he experienced the transition. At T1 and T2, he recalled positive feelings on his first day and early experiences.

"Feel? Good. Yeah. Yeah. Because I liked it" (T1).

"My first day. Excited. Because it was... yeah different." (T1)

**4.10.2 Sub-theme 2: Social opportunities**

Lee's early experiences of college were that it was a big opportunity to make new friendships. This theme ran across both of Lee's interviews; however the kind of social interaction differed from T1 and T2. In T1, Lee discussed his move to college as an opportunity to make new friends and extend his social circle. In T2, Lee identified one young person he had grown close to and considered a good friend at college.

"My friend A. I always share a KitKat with A. He likes a KitKat." (T1)

"On my first day? Good. I didn't see him before. First time I met him. Yeah hadn't met before. I talked. Well... he can't hear. So he can't talk properly." (T1)

At T2, the social opportunity of college was even more central to Lee's college experience. He identified a girl he liked at college and talked of asking her out. This girl also replaced photocopying as his favourite thing about college from T1.

"I like that girl. As a friend". (T2)

"I'm going to ask her out at lunch." (T2)

"Lunch is good. I'll see my friend, the girl, at lunch." (T2)

**4.10.3 Sub-theme 3: Making sense of college**

At T1, Lee made comparisons with his old school to help him make sense of his early college experience.

"Not a lot has changed. Computers are the same. There's a library. Because we go there on Thursday. Well, I can. There's bikes." (T1)

"Work is the same. But there's no library at [names old provision]. And we weren't allowed to use the photocopier." (T1)

At T2, Lee did not mention his old school or make comparisons between his old school and college. Instead he spoke about the college routine and aspects of his college curriculum.

"Well, we do sightseeing. Sometimes we go to Richmond." (T2)

"Monday, work. Tuesday computer room and Wednesday computer room. Thursday, go the library and not here on Friday." (T2)

At both T1 and T2, Lee spoke about college as it being an educational opportunity for him. He reported that college was a place to further his learning and support him with getting a job in the future.

"Work. It's important here. It can help me. Get on and get a job maybe." (T1)

"College? Well... it's a place for learning." (T1)

"Why? Because I'm learning here." (T2)

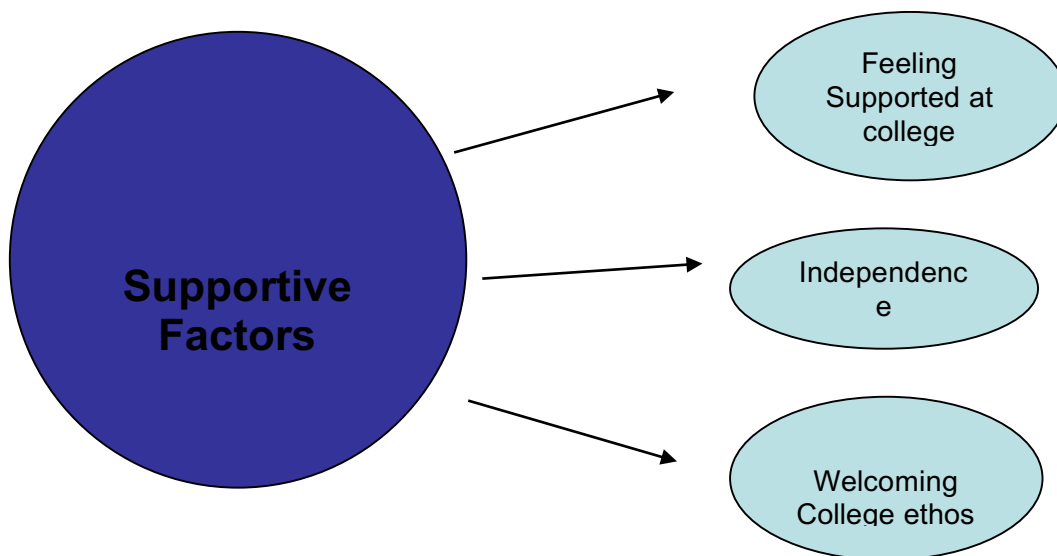
#### **4.11 Research Question 2: What did Lee identify as challenging and supportive factors in his transition to college?**

In response to Research Question 2, two overarching themes were developed from Lee's interviews. These were "Supportive Factors" and "Challenging Factors". Three sub-themes were identified for supportive factors. These were: "Feeling supported at college", "Independence" and "Welcoming College Ethos". One sub-theme was identified from Lee's accounts, as a challenging factor in Lee's transition. This has been labelled "Loss and endings". Each of the sub-themes will be discussed in turn

#### 4.11.1 Supportive Factors

Three supportive factors were identified from Lee's responses and are presented below in Figure 15.

**Figure 15: Thematic Map of findings for Lee in relation to Research Question 2: Supportive Factors**



##### 4.11.1.1 Sub-theme 1: Feeling supported at college

In both of Lee's interviews, he spoke of the support he received in college from college staff. He could identify the people who helped him and recalled how his teacher helped him at college.

"My teacher helps." (T1)

"J helps me with my work." (T1)

"D, that's a staff." (T2)

"Work, like... she like... helps me and then she tells me not to make the noise because A does it." (T1)

At T2, Lee repeated that he was supported by college staff but also noted that a friend at college helped him in class.

"A's a student...but I think A helps me." (T2)

At T1, Lee also discussed the support he had received from his father when deciding to come to college, supporting him at meetings, showing his approval of the college with Lee.

"There was a meeting, Wednesday I think it was, with me and dad (inaudible) said yeah, we're going to go yeah. Lee. College yeah." (T1)

#### *4.11.1.2 Sub-theme 2: Independence*

In thinking about college and what had supported him at college, Lee reported feeling more autonomous at college. He compared feeling more independent at college to how he felt at school.

"At [names old school], we weren't allowed to use the photocopier. But here we can. I do photocopying all myself." (T1)

"Thursday. Because I get to go to the Library at break. Only me. Just me on a Thursday." (T1)

#### *4.11.1.3 Sub-theme 3: Sense of Belonging*

At T1, Lee reported feeling welcome when he first started at college. He recalled people saying hello to him, including his teacher and he found this a supportive factor in his move to college. Lee did not focus particularly on feeling welcome at T2, but demonstrated his feeling of being included and welcomed at college by listing all of his friends at college and described how helpful his teacher was in class.



"I was welcome. Seeing new people." (T1).

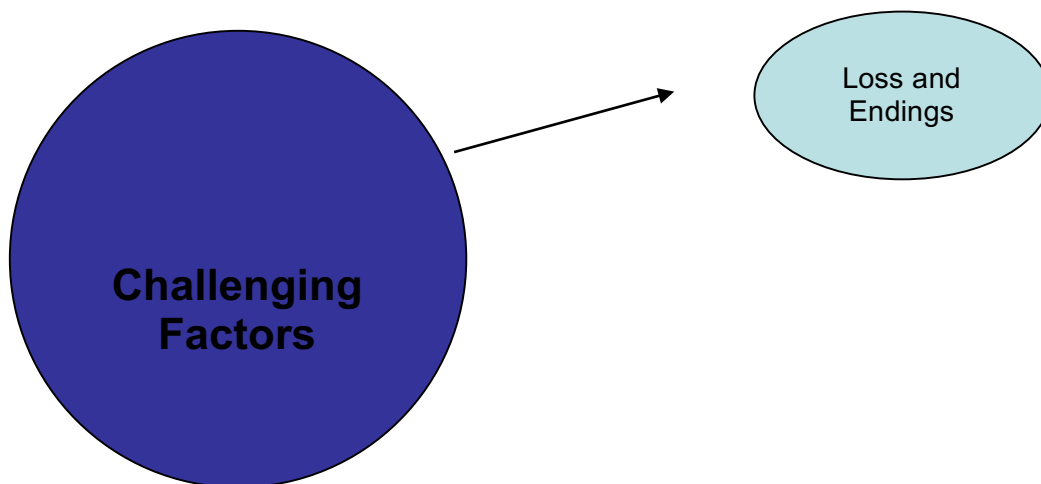
"I said hi to them. How you doing? Julie said that was good." (T1)

"Lots of people said hello...Even Julie." (T1)

#### **4.11.2 Challenging Factors**

In his interview at T1, Lee identified one factor which had had a negative influence of transition. This was the separation from his friends at school, which led to the development of the sub-theme "Loss and Endings".

**Figure 16: Thematic Map of findings for Lee in relation to Research Question 2: Challenging Factors**



##### **4.11.2.1 Sub-theme 1: Loss and endings**

Lee talked about having lost contact with his friends from school and not knowing where they had moved to. He spoke of one friend in particular that he knew from school and was close to and had no idea where he was now. He also noted that his friend would have loved being at college with him and losing

contact with him was the only sad thing about moving on from secondary school to college.

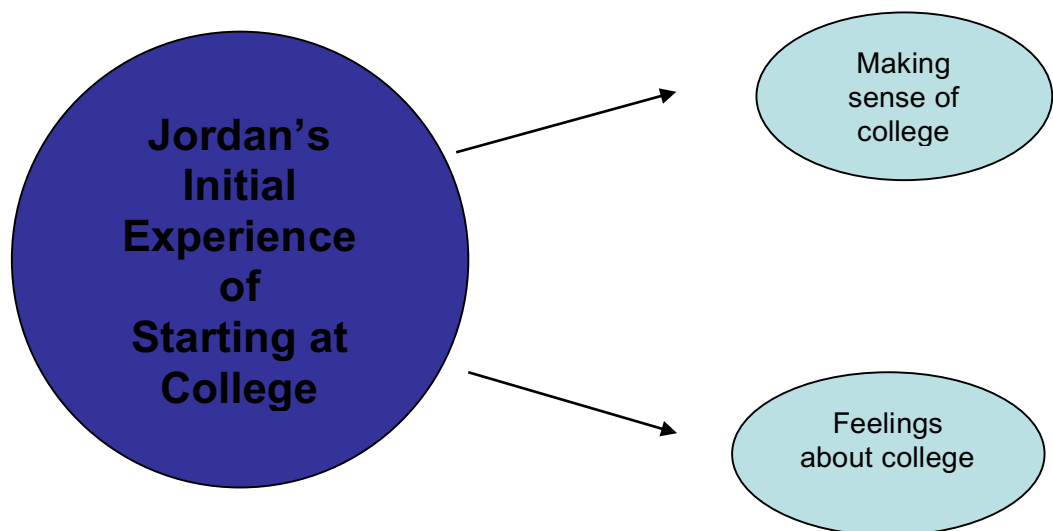
"Yeah, Archie, have you met him? He's a good friend. I don't know where he's gone now. He's gone to a different one I think maybe. I like Archie. He would love it here." (T1)

## **JORDAN**

### **4.12 Research Question 1: how did Jordan experience the initial transition to college?**

One overarching theme emerged in Jordan's data, with two sub-themes also identified. The sub-themes were "Making sense of college" and "Feelings about college". The sub-themes will be discussed in turn.

**Figure 17: Thematic Map of findings for Jordan in relation to Research Question 1**



#### **4.12.1 Sub-theme 1: Making sense of college**

When asked about what he understood about being at college, Jordan spoke about the college environment and how he spent his lunch times at college, as well as subjects he studied at college.

"Because it's quiet, it's much bigger and I like that for me." (T1)

"Lunch? Oh that's the best. Because I like to eat but I don't like to eat at home but here. It's alright. We go the canteen." (T1)

At T1, Jordan indicated that he understood the function of college and that it was a place that could extend his learning. At T2 Jordan continued to identify subjects he enjoyed, however he did not make reference to college as a learning environment in the way he did at T1.

"College. It's the best thing for me. For learning." (T1)

#### **4.12.2 Sub-theme 2: Feelings about college**

At T1, Jordan expressed strong positive feelings about college. He recalled having presumptions about college before starting and feeling positive about the move. At T2, Jordan remained positive about college, citing subjects he liked and the quietness of college compared with his old school.

"I thought... it would be nice. And a bit quiet." (T1)

"It was and it was really good, I enjoyed it, was really good for me." (T1)

"I knew... that I liked it you know." (T2)

At T1, Jordan reported feeling understood at college and feeling like he belonged there. For him, this influenced his early thoughts and feelings about his college experience when he started in September

"It's like a brand new family when I started." (T1)

It's alright...makes me feel happy... and it's understanding." (T1)

"The teachers help me. Understanding and that." (T1)

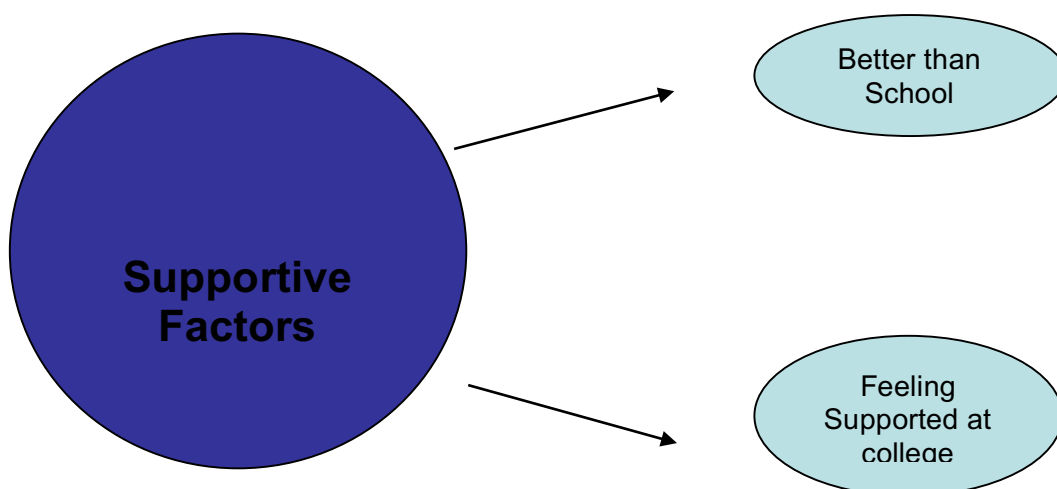
#### **4.13 Research Question 2: What did Jordan identify as challenging and supportive factors in his transition to college?**

In answering Research Question 2, two overarching themes were created; "Supportive factors" and "Challenging factors". Two sub-themes were identified as supportive factors; "Feeling supported at college" and "Better than school". One sub-theme was developed as a challenging factor. the challenging factor identified for Jordan was "Feeling tired".

##### **4.13.1 Supportive Factors**

Two supportive factors were identified by Jordan and are illustrated in Figure 17. each sub-theme will be discussed in turn (below).

**Figure 18: Thematic Map of findings for Jordan in relation to Research Question 2: Supportive Factors**



4.13.1.1 *Sub-theme 1: Feeling supported at college*

Feeling supported at college was a strong feature of Jordan's early experience of college. At T1, he identified who supported him. He recognised the college staff in general but was more specific about the help he received from his mother, identifying her as a key support in his transition experience. At T2, Jordan named people at college who supported him, especially in class and spoke a little about how they helped him.

"Mum likes it. She tried the college and said it's ok." "Why? Because it's a good decision being here" (T1)

"My mum...and college. She said because it's the best thing for me." (T1)

Visiting the college before starting with his school and knowing someone from his school at college were supportive factors for Jordan. He also mentioned that he had a picture of his teacher before starting and that helped too.

"Yeah, I was here with the school." (T1)

"Yeah, I had seen him. I had of picture of him. So I knew yeah." (T1)

"I'm not too sure. The tall guy went to [names old school]. So yeah I knew him and he's alright." (T1)

4.13.1.2 *Sub-theme 2: Better than school*

Jordan's experience at school was quite negative. At T1, he rated his school one out of ten and made reference to not enjoying his time at school. Jordan saw college as an opportunity to start again and found the prospect of moving away from his secondary school really appealing. Jordan reported having a more positive outlook on college and the fact that it meant that he did not have

to go to secondary school any more was a supportive factor in his transition and attitude towards college.

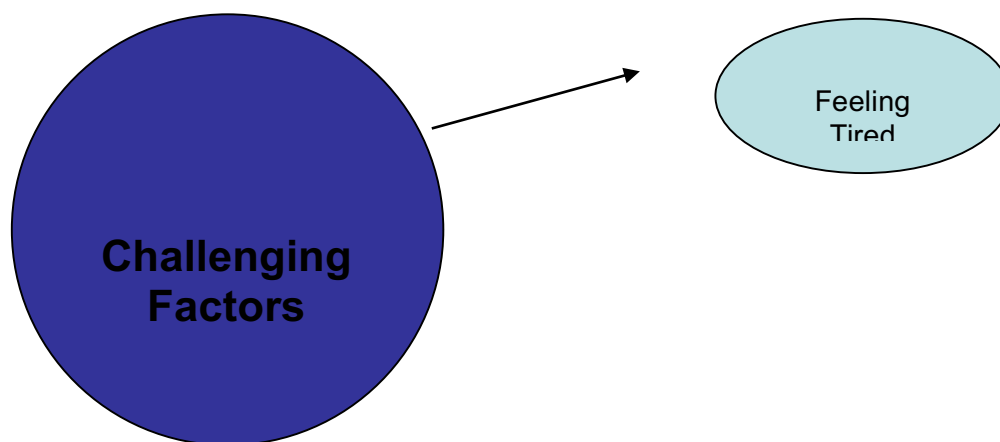
"College? 10 out of 10. It's the best" "Why? Because it's quiet and its bigger." (T1)

"I like it 10 out of 10. School? 1 out of 10. Always." (T1)

#### **4.13.2 Challenging Factors for Jordan:**

One factor was identified as being a challenging for Jordan during his initial experience of college. This was labelled as "Feeling Tired" and is illustrated in Figure 19.

**Figure 19: Thematic Map of findings for Jordan in relation to Research Question 2: Challenging Factors**



##### **4.13.2.1 Sub-theme 1: Feeling tired**

At T1, Jordan reported finding college tiring and mentioned on a couple of occasions that the length of the college day remained a challenge for him. At T2, Jordan did not report feeling tired at college any longer.

"I'm still sleepy. Just bit knackered with college." (T1).

"What? Hold on, about college? I'm... still tired yeah you know. Long." (T1)

#### **4.14 Findings Summary**

##### Common themes within Research Question 1:

- At both T1 and T2, young people reported feeling positive once they began at college, although two of the young people were apprehensive before starting.
- At T1, young people made sense of their college experience by making comparisons with their old schools and at T2, young people did not refer to their old schools, instead discussed the college curriculum, favourite subjects and physical layout of their classrooms.
- College was seen as an opportunity to make new friendships and extend their social circle by four of the five young people.

##### Common themes within Research Question 2:

- A frequent theme to emerge from the data was the young people's awareness of the kinds of support they received, from family, friends and college staff.
- Another strong emergent theme was the loss experienced when transitioning to college. Three of the young people reported missing old friends and losing contact with them since moving to college.
- Three of the young people were clear that college was the beginning of a new chapter. They were clear that school had to come to an end and college was the necessary next move for them.

## YOUNG PEOPLE WITH SLD'S EXPERIENCE OF COLLEGE

- Feeling tired at college was another theme that ran throughout the young people's accounts of their college experience.

### Differences in the data for Research Questions 1 and 2:

Several differences were also noted within the young people's individual responses. An example of this is how Matthew reported finding the curriculum at college accessible. The other young people did not discuss in either T1 or T2 how they were engaging with the lessons at college. Another difference was Lee's social experience at college. He was the only young person to discuss having a relationship at college. Related to this Lydia and Lee were the only two young people to describe feeling more independent at college; with Lydia particularly aware that college was an opportunity to become more adult.



## 5. DISCUSSION

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This study sought to answer two research questions regarding the experiences of young people with SLD transitioning from school to a FE college. Research Question 1 explored the initial experiences of the young people since beginning their FE. Research Question 2 considered the challenging and supportive factors perceived by the young people in their transition. This study aimed, particularly, to elicit the viewpoint of the young people themselves and present their experiences, thoughts and feelings about starting at college in a clear and coherent way.

Five young people with SLD were interviewed; four were interviewed twice: once in their second week of college and again six weeks later. One young person was unavailable for the follow up interview. The interviews explored the young peoples' initial experiences at college, including the positives and negatives of their transition experience. The case study approach as described by Yin (2009) was adopted as the study's methodology and enabled each young person's voice to be explored and presented individually, acknowledging the heterogeneous nature the population being interviewed. In order to answer the research questions posed, the interviews were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analytical procedure allowed for themes to be identified within the data and to engage with their experiences.

This chapter begins by identifying the limitations of the study in order to acknowledge their importance and impact on the conclusions made about the study's findings. For the same reason, the research challenges encountered

throughout the study are also discussed. The chapter then draws on existing literature and psychological theories to provide context and understanding to the young peoples' experiences of starting college. It also discusses how the current study fits within the literature and the study's implications, in particular the role of the educational psychologist working in FE and eliciting the voice of vulnerable populations.

### **5.1 Limitations of the Study**

Firstly, the findings of this study are restricted to the small sample interviewed and it is therefore questionable the extent to which it is possible to generalise about a population with varying needs. Secondly, two of the young people opted to be supported by a teaching assistant in the follow up interview; whilst it was important to ensure the young person's voice was facilitated in every way possible, it was noted that the young people who were supported by a teaching assistant were noticeably less forth-coming in the presence of an adult from the college.

A further limitation to be considered is the timescale of the study: a longitudinal design may have enabled a more in-depth exploration of how the young people engaged with their transition to college over time. This study did not include young people's experiences prior to the transition and several follow up interviews across the year would perhaps have provided more enriched data about the transition to and experiences of college. However, time to complete this study impacted on its design and capacity.

As noted, the sample size of this study was relatively small and could be considered a limitation. The time associated with developing materials to elicit the

young peoples' voice and interviewing the young people, coupled with a short time period in which to complete the research, resulted in the need for a small sample size. Additionally, all of the young people in the FE provision were initially invited to participate in the research, however only five young people consented and had parental consent to participate. This significantly influenced the sample size.

### **5.2 Challenges Encountered During the Study**

The young people's varying attention span and distractibility was an unpredicted variable at the beginning of the study. Questions from the interview schedule were sometimes met with answers which were completely unrelated to the conversation being had; such as singing a Blur song or listing different types of cake. This was not because the young people could not access or understand the question, as, when redirected they returned to the question and answered it to the best of their ability. As earlier noted in the introduction, researchers such as Imray (2005) have identified a significant difficulty with concentration as a characteristic of young people with SLD, and although the young people were not a homogeneous sample, it was evident across all interviews that sustaining concentration was a difficulty each experienced. The difficulty staying on topic was supported by gentle redirection and prompting, while at times engaging in the conversation with the young person for several minutes and then agreeing to return to the questions being asked.

### **5.3 Research Question 1: How did the young people experience college?**

All of the young people were able to express their views and feelings about their move to college. They all shared in their interviews what they understood college to be about and their feelings about the positives and negatives of being at college. The young people appeared to associate being at college as being a real opportunity to make friends and expand their social circle. They also discussed college as being an opportunity to continue with their education, clearly identifying learning as an important component to being at college. The young people's responses will be further discussed under the three sub-themes, "Making sense of college", "College as a social opportunity" and "Feelings about college".

#### ***5.3.1 Making Sense of College***

When discussing their initial experiences of starting at college, the young people had a tendency to make sense of their experience at college by comparing it with their previous experiences at school. All of the young people compared and contrasted features of college with their old school environment in the first interview. Lee, for example, expressed liking college because there was a big library at college and he did not have this at his old school. This sense-making strategy was noted across all the young people's first interviews. However, at the follow up interview, none of the young people discussed their old school but spoke more readily about their college experience without making any comparisons. This finding is consistent with Aston et al. (2005) who also noted that young people made sense of their transition to college, training or work by making some comparison with their previous provision. However, in Aston and

colleagues' follow up with their young people, the young people continued to make reference to their old provision. This differs to the current study's findings and perhaps could be explained by the inclusiveness of the college setting attended by the young people who participated in the present study. The inclusive ethos of the college will be discussed further (below).

The young people also all made reference to the more concrete features of college when asked about their initial experiences in the first interview. They all described features of their college classroom and provided limited insight into the subjects they studied at college. However, in the follow up interview, the young people were able to list more confidently the subjects they enjoyed and disliked at college, could provide details of their college timetable and knew which day of the week their favourite subject or lesson was on. They could also recall lessons they liked and disliked at college and appeared to be able to connect their time at college as an educational opportunity. On the whole, the literature has not detailed the young person's understanding of their new provision, or asked what they would want or need from a new provision.

Studies have asked parents, carers and professionals about the decision-making process for post-16 provision and their feelings on their young person's post-16 options (Carnaby et al., 2003). However, studies asking the young person with SLD or learning difficulties about their aspirations or hopes for transition and moving on are more generally quite scarce as noted by Edwards (2008). The current study adds to the literature in this area and also demonstrates that young people with difficulties are capable of making sense of transition and change and, also, that they can do so by employing strategies,

such as comparing and contrasting the change with relevant previous experiences.

Studies which included a follow up interview, such as Carroll and Dockrell (2012) and Aston and colleagues (2005) asked young people with learning difficulties to reflect on their transition after a long period of time. These studies followed up with the young people at least a year after the initial transition and used surveys and telephone interviews to explore the young people's views which perhaps was too long a time period and did not utilise the best methods for eliciting the young people's voice. The current study is the first study to include a follow up interview with the young people in the same term. This time lapse enabled the young people time to settle into college and provided space for them to reflect on what was important to them at college and what college represents to them. The response rates to the follow up interviews in the Carroll and Dockrell (2012) and Aston et al. (2005) studies were low and their young people did not always clearly recall their transition experience, which may have been related to the lengthy delay in their follow up interview. The short time period of six weeks between T1 and T2 in the current study meant that the young people did not have to recall their experiences from a long time ago and the shorter follow up time perhaps aided the young people's engagement and responses at T2.

### ***5.3.2 College as a Social Opportunity***

Friendship was a strong factor in the young people's responses. Their initial experiences of being at college appeared to be significantly influenced by their perceived opportunity to make friends at college. Four of the young people made reference to the social aspect of college they had experienced since their

move. They described college as an opportunity for them to develop socially. As discussed in the literature review, adolescent development includes a separation from parents and an increase in the importance of peer relationships. The young people in this study demonstrated that they found friendship to be a supportive factor in helping them to regulate their emotions and make sense of their move to college. Peers as a supportive factor is further considered (below). The young people all identified the friends they had made at college and three of the young people cited their new friends and the ability to make friends at college as their favourite part of the college experience. Indeed, the young people experienced college as an opportunity to extend their social circle and also potentially provide them with an opportunity to begin a relationship with a significant other, as noted by Lee in his follow up interview.

The trajectory from adolescent to adulthood for young people with learning difficulties has been suggested by researchers as being different to that of their peers without learning difficulties. (for example: Griffiths, 1994). It has been noted that young people with learning difficulties will not experience the same rites of passage as young people without difficulties; for example, Griffith (1994) reported that young people with learning difficulties will not experience marriage as a rite of passage and that attending college is the most significant indicator that the young person with difficulties has transitioned successfully to adulthood. Lee's responses, however, in his second interview, perhaps demonstrate an ability of young people with learning difficulties to connect with other aspects of adulthood. In his first interview, Lee identified the photocopier as being one of the most important things he liked about college; however, in his second interview the photocopier had been forgotten and he talked at length about a girl he liked at

college and his desire to ask her out and maybe be her boyfriend. Whilst Lee may not have been talking about marriage, his responses do suggest that young people with learning difficulties are comparable to their peers without difficulties, showing an interest in finding a significant other or partner during the late adolescent years and using college as an opportunity to find someone of interest.

Although this study's findings are generally compatible with youth transition research, young people's value on developing friendships on starting college did not fit with findings from the Heslop et al. (2007) study in which young people with learning difficulties reported that they did not feel confident initially in their new environment and were unsure about new friendships and about being supported by new peers and staff. The questions asked in both studies were very similar, for example: exploring who their friends were once they had transitioned to their new provision, had they remained in contact with their friends from secondary school. Therefore, the differences in findings cannot be attributed to the interview schedule as the questions asked were comparable. The difference in findings between the studies around the topic of friendship could perhaps be explained by the different contexts of both studies. The young people in their study were transitioning from a long term residential setting to a new residential setting, whereas the young people in the present study had transitioned from a variety of provisions to college. Possibly, being in a residential setting and moving to a new residential setting impacted on the young people's feelings around making new friends in the Heslop et al. (2007) study.



### **5.3.3 *Feelings about College***

Before starting college, two of the young people noted feeling worried, anxious and sad; however, once starting at college these feelings had turned into positive feelings about college. The young people cited friends and college staff, as well as lunchtime in the main canteen and library time as factors which had caused positive feelings about college. One young person, Jordan, reported feeling positive about college because he felt like he was part of a family and felt understood at college. This finding correlates with previous research by Heslop and colleagues (2007), in which young people reported feeling afraid and anxious about their transition because they feared they would not be understood and unfamiliar staff and peers would not understand their needs.

Related to being understood, feeling a sense of belonging at their new provision was important to the young people in the present study. Inclusive ethos was briefly considered in the previous paragraphs and relates to the sense of belonging the young people felt at college. The young people all reported feeling settled and part of college. None of the young people appeared to feel that they did not belong at college or were not happy at college; in fact, there was a sense of contentment amongst all the young people when discussing their college experience.

Sense of belonging is a fundamental human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Maslow (1954) developed a theory called the Hierarchy of Needs in which he proposed that humans have a range of different basic needs; however, these needs were at different levels, from basic physiological needs such as warmth, to developing life goals and challenges known as "self-actualisation". Maslow asserted that lower level needs had to be satisfied before satisfying higher needs.

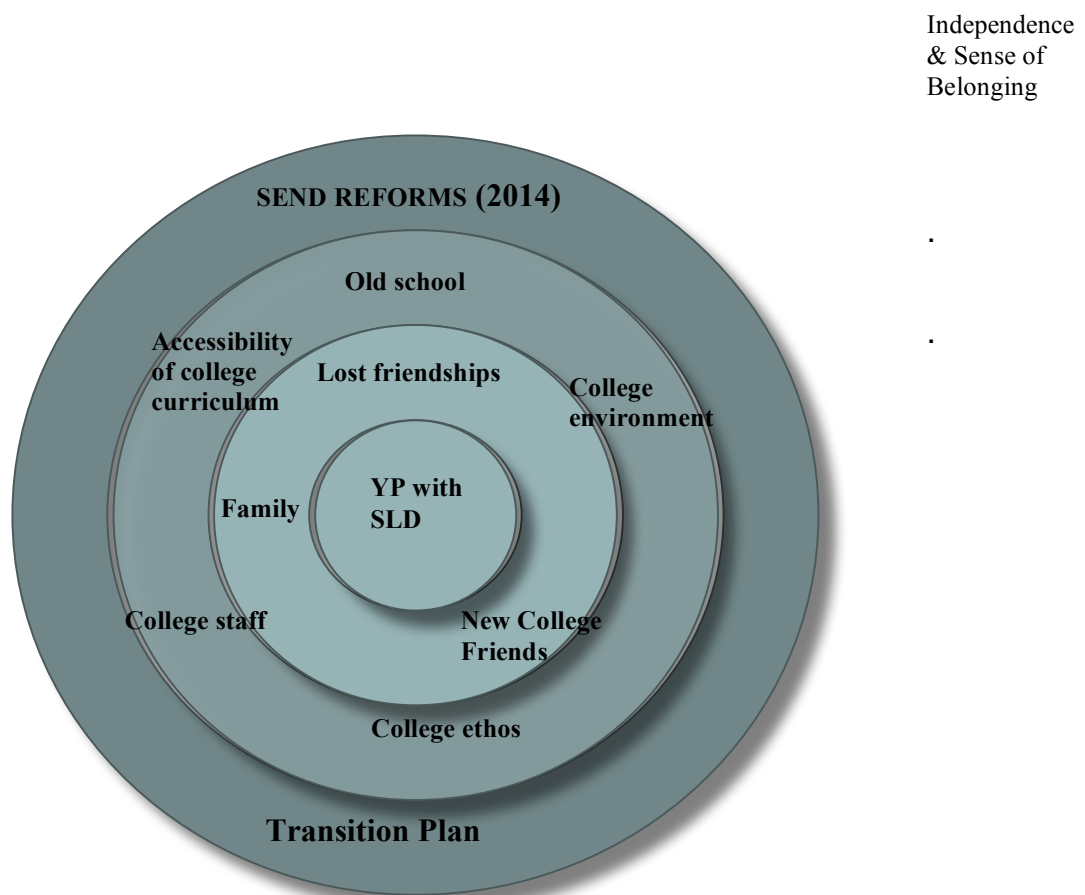
In Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1954), belongingness and love are medium level needs that need to be satisfied if an individual is to achieve positive self-esteem and future life goals. Applying Maslow's theory to the young people's transition to college, it would appear that feeling a sense of belonging at college is not only a fundamental human need, but it is necessary in promoting positive self-esteem and emotional well-being for the young people. Field (2010) noted that change is experienced at both the individual and collective level and it is therefore important to consider how the young people are introduced to the college community and how, as a group of learners, as well as individually, they perceive their transition to FE and their development of a sense of belonging individually and collectively within the college.

### **5.4 Research Question 2: What did the young people identify as supportive and challenging factors?**

To further understand the findings from research question 2, this study reflects back on Bronfenbrenner's eco-system model (1979). Within this framework, it was possible to make sense of the factors, both supportive and challenging, that the young people reported on as initial positive and negative influences on their college experience. Figure 19 below, is a diagram detailing the factors identified by the young people, which they felt had interacted and impacted on their experience of FE. Understanding the factors influencing the young people's initial experience of college began by placing the young person at the centre of the framework (the microsystem). Once identified, the variables were then placed within the systems around the young people, i.e. the mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem in order to provide a diagrammatical

perspective on the interacting factors within the transition experience. From Figure 20, it is possible to view the different levels at which the young people were influenced in the transition. This perspective of the challenging and supportive factors suggested that the influences and interactions during transition are non-linear and multi-faceted, as had been suggested by Bronfenbrenner (1979). The supportive and challenging themes identified by the young people will be discussed in turn.

**Figure 20: Factors affecting the initial experience of college for the young people identified in the cross case and individual findings.**



### **5.4.1 Supportive Factors**

The young people interviewed in this study all identified the support network around them and connected their initial experiences, perceptions and feelings about college with the support that they received from their support network. Young people identified family members, old friends and new friends as key supports in their transition to, and early experience of, college. These findings were consistent with much of the literature around transition for young people with SEN (Aston et al., 2005; Carroll & Dockrell, 2012; Landmark et al., 2010; Stewart et al., 2010). The young people also identified feeling supported by college staff as a supportive factor and the welcoming, inclusive ethos of their new environment as important transition factors for them.

One young person reported that knowing he was leaving school was an important factor in his successful transition to college. He could not recall when he was told, but was clear that it was time to leave school and begin at college. Preparation for college appeared to be an important factor for him in his transition. This finding correlates with previous research and government policy on transition planning and support. Government guidance (DfE, 2011, 2014) and several studies (for example, Crawford 2012; Heslop et al., 2002) have highlighted the importance of preparing the young person for their transition, including visits to their new provision, having photographs of the new environment and new people.

#### **5.4.1.1 Parents as a Supportive Factor**

The findings from the current study are consistent with the findings from Aston et al. (2005) in which 32% of young people identified their parents as the

most influential factor in their transition and Landmark et al's (2010) international study, in which young people with SEN also identified their parents as the most significant factor in their transition to college experience. Both studies demonstrated the young people's awareness of their parents' views, which is similar to the findings of the current study. No study, however, reported that young people were aware of their parents' feelings about moving on or connected their feelings and anxieties with that of their parents, as was the case in the present study.

The young people also demonstrated an awareness of their parents' and family's feelings and opinions on their transition to college. One young person, Lydia, recalled seeing her mother cry when she left her old school and could connect her mother's upset with her leaving school and to her own feelings about being sad and upset at leaving an environment she had felt supported in for a long period of time. The impact of family feelings and opinions on decisions about the young people's transition to college have been documented in the literature; with family involvement highlighted as an important factor in how transition is experienced by young people (Neece, Kraemer, & Blacher, 2009; Seyfried & Chung, 2002; Test et al., 2009). There are few studies that have reported on the young people's awareness of their parents and family's viewpoints.

In the present study, the young people identified both parents as a supportive factor in their transition. Although not a focus of this study, in terms of supportive factors, it perhaps should be noted that mothers were repeatedly identified as the young people's source of support. Fathers were not mentioned at all except by Lee, who identified his father as the person who attended transition meetings with him and supported his decision to go to college. Within

the literature, mothers are often the only parent identified as being a source of support and included in research (for example: Hubert, 2010).

### 5.4.1.2 *Young People's Desire to be Independent*

College provided an opportunity to be more independent for two of the young people, who linked moving to college with being more adult. As mentioned earlier in the discussion, college is often noted as the primary and sometimes the only indicator that the young person with learning difficulties has successfully transitioned into adulthood (Griffiths, 1994). College for both Lee and Lydia appeared to clearly signify the move towards being more autonomous and adult. This finding compares with adolescents without learning difficulties, who also denote moving to college as an indicator of becoming more independent and adult (Coleman, 2011).

Lydia acknowledged the support she received from her family, particularly from her mother; however, college for her was an enabler of independence. Independence from parental and school support appeared very important to Lydia and attending college signified the transition from child to adult for her. A task of adolescence, as noted by Allen, Porter, McFarland, McElhaney and Marsh (2007), is achieving independence from parents, whilst being able to maintain relatedness to them. This was a particularly relevant issue for Lydia, who expressed a desire to be allowed space to become more independent and seen in a more adult and capable light. Lydia, however, also noted the importance of being supported by her mother and reported that she depended on her mother to help her manage her peer relations and maintain old friendships from schools.

Lee also reported feelings of being more independent at college; he in particular appeared to enjoy being seen as more capable at college. Lee made several references to the college photocopier in his first interview, a topic that clearly excited him. When asked about the photocopier, Lee spoke about being able to use the photocopier by himself at college and described how to change the toner and paper in the copier. He also noted that he was never allowed to use the photocopier at his old school, never mind change the toner or refill the paper. Photocopying appeared to be a symbol of independence for Lee. In school he was not allowed to use the photocopier, perhaps because the receptionist would not let him or because he was seen as not being capable of using the photocopier. This perhaps correlates with the view of young people with learning difficulty from a deficit model. Encouraging and actively promoting independence for young people such as Lee is an important finding of this study and questions to what extent young people are central to their own decision-making and are enabled to be more self-supporting, particularly as they move towards adulthood.

### *5.4.1.3 Feeling Included at College as a Supportive Factor*

The inclusiveness of the college must be noted as a key factor in supporting the young people as they began college. All of the young people reported feeling supported by college staff and felt that they belonged at college. This finding about college staff support is consistent with previous literature; for example, Aston et al. (2005) reported that 17% of young people cited college tutors as being the most important factor in an easy transition experience. While young people in previous research reported feeling supported by college staff, previous research has not reported young people expressing feelings of being

included. None reported young people identifying college ethos or feeling welcome as being important transition factors and early experiences of college. Feeling included at college was for example not reported in Heslop and colleagues' study (2007). Their young people did not feel included when they moved provisions with several young people experiencing very difficult transitions. As discussed earlier the young people in Heslop et al. (2007) study reported being fearful of not being understood by support staff.

The current study however noted that young people experienced feelings of being included and that this was an important transition factor for them in their early experiences of college. Reasons for the young people feeling included in the current study may relate to the context of their college environment. College for them, included being supported within a purpose built, specialist provision which was attached to a mainstream college. The young people had their lessons in the specialist centre; however, they were actively encouraged by support staff and teaching staff to use the library and the canteen alongside their mainstream peers. Two of the young people noted that lunch time was one of their favourite times of day and they got to meet people and everyone was friendly over in the canteen.

It could therefore be speculated with a degree of confidence that the inclusive ethos of the college environment impacted positively on the young people's understanding of college and helped them to settle and make friends more easily. Studies by Munn et al. (2000) and Hatton (2013) similarly reported on the importance of education provisions being inclusive in ethos and promoting the holistic well-being and development of young people. Being included within their specialist provision and also within the wider college environment appeared



to be an important factor for the young people in the current study in how they positively experienced their initial transition to college.

### ***5.4.2 Challenging Factors***

The present study found that all the young people experienced adjustment challenges in their move to college. Three of the young people were concerned with the separation and loss of their old friends from secondary school. The young people had no idea where their friends were or why they had not transitioned with them; this caused them significant emotional upset and, initially, impacted negatively on how they felt about starting at college. This has not been found in other studies of young people with SLD, primarily because there are a dearth of studies focussing on young people with SLD. Research with young people with less severe learning difficulties has also found that these young people report missing their old school and friends (Carroll & Dockrell, 2012, Heslop et al; 2007). It should be noted that this finding in the current study is a time sensitive factor i.e. at T1, young people reported missing their friends from their old school and appeared upset by the loss; however, in the second interview, none of the young people commented on their old friends or the separation and upset they felt. Instead, the young people reported feeling supported by their peers and all were able to list the new friends they had made since starting at college. In the current study, the young people's move towards their new friends in college at the second time of interviewing may be explained by findings from researchers such as Berndt and Keefe (1995) who have demonstrated that friendship can promote positive adjustment, particularly during times of transition. Hartup (1992) also reported that the social networks and emotional connections

that young people establish and maintain with their peers is often a key source of social support for young people during times of stress or adjustment.

Although the findings for the supportive factors are broadly consistent with findings from other studies, the challenging factors identified by the young people differ from other studies. Feeling tired was a strongly recurring theme within the young people's responses. The young people were interviewed at different times of the day, on both occasions and so the time of interview is not likely to have influenced the young people's feelings of tiredness. Furthermore, the young people were able to cite the length of the college day, its difference from school hours and longer commutes as being causes of their tiredness. It appears from their responses at T1, that the length of the college day in particular, was not something the young people had prepared for and required some adjustment to. At T2, none of the young people reported feeling tired at college and it appears that they had all managed to successfully overcome this challenging feature. Reference again is made to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1954) and the importance of meeting an individual's physiological needs before other needs in order to promote holistic well-being. Imray and Hinchcliffe (2014) also suggested that it is essential that adults assist young people with any physiological issues, such as illness, pain, hunger or tiredness to enable young people to feel secure, understood, supported and engaged in their learning environment. The tiredness identified by the young people in the current study at T1 therefore perhaps required more awareness of and support with during the initial transition to the longer college day.

## 5.5 Implications of the Present Study

Implications arising from the present study are:

- the importance of eliciting the voice of the young person with SLD
- the need for transition support programmes
- the role of the educational psychologist

All three are discussed below.

### ***5.5.1 Eliciting the Voice of the Young Person with SLD***

The present study yielded a number of themes in relation to the research questions. The breadth and depth of the findings justified the use of the pragmatic approach taken by the study, in that the study was not limited by particular theoretical perspectives and the views of the young people were sought in ways which were facilitative for them as individuals. The outcome of this study demonstrates the ability and capacity of young people with SLD to express their views and feelings and supports previous similar findings within the literature (Aston et al., 2005; McConkey, 2001)

The present study illustrated that young people with SLD are not a homogeneous group, that they each have particular strengths and difficulties; for example, one of the young people spoke at length in the first interview compared with another young person who had said everything he needed to say after twenty minutes. The difference in expressive language was also evident in the young people's receptive language, with some young people requiring less prompting and repetition of the interview questions. Despite the differences in ability within the sample, all young people demonstrated that they were capable

of providing a viewpoint, when asked appropriately. This study adds to the argument within the literature and government policy, that young peoples' views should be more actively sought by professionals (for example: Cameron & Murphy, 2002; DfE, 2014; McGarry & Lunt, 2006).

### ***5.5.2 Implications for Transition Planning***

Findings from the present study suggest that it is particularly important to elicit the views of the young people during transition planning in order to understand their transition needs more fully. Some of the needs noted by Townsley (2004) within this study's introduction were identified and reported by the young people during their interviews. As earlier noted in the discussion the young people were able to identify their transition needs, categorising them into supportive and challenging factors. The needs of the young people however were not unanimous across the group because the group was not a homogenous sample. Including young people in an individual, person centred way during transition planning is therefore very important.

Cullen and Cullen (2015) considered the implications for how schools might better prepare young people for the transition to post school education. They identified factors associated with the successful transitions of their young people in their study. These included the secondary school encouraging the young person to visit their new provision. Schools were also encouraged to engage in person centre planning and to include the young person in this process. It was also suggested that improved information about college options for parents and young people and that the school should encourage greater involvement of parents.

The current study also offers suggestive evidence about factors which perhaps require more thought in the transition planning process. In particular, the issue of supporting young people to maintain and build new friendships was highlighted as requiring more thought during transition planning. The loss of old friends during the transition to college was a major influence on how the young people in the current study experienced college at first. The young people, Lydia, Lee and Rema in particular, were upset when talking about their old friends, clearly missed them and were confused as to why they had not transitioned with them. Lydia talked of being at her previous school for ten years; a long time to spend with her peers and now has lost contact with almost all of them, except for one friend who her mother had suggested they meet for lunch. Policy relating to transition planning does not include guidance on helping young people to maintain friendships and relationships after they leave school. It is therefore recommended, based on the current study's findings, that helping young people to maintain friendships should be included in transition planning.

### ***5.5.3 Role of the Educational Psychologist (EP)***

The role of the educational psychologist is broad and multi-faceted, which prompted Ashton and Roberts (2006) to query why the role is so difficult to clearly define. It has been reported that key roles for the educational psychologist include being an advocate for young people and using consultative and interpersonal skills to identify and problem solve barriers to young peoples' learning experiences (Ashton & Roberts, 2006; Evans, Grahamslaw, Henson, & Prince, 2012; Fallon et al., 2010; Farrell et al., 2006). The roles and skill set of the educational psychologist was reviewed by Farrell and colleagues (2006),

capturing the views of head teachers, educational psychologists, young people, parents and other professional associates. Findings suggested that educational psychologists engage in work at a range of levels, including individual work, consultancy, intervention and training, across a variety of settings.

FE has been added to the EP remit during the SEND Reforms (DfE, 2011) and SEND Code of Practice (DfE, 2014) and the age of involvement has been increased from 0-19 years to 0-25 years. However, while the role may change and be subject to current government policy, the necessary skill-set of the EP remains consistent. For example, the EP approach to consultation, skills in rapport building, therapeutic intervention and involvement in multi-agency working all remain relevant to practice with the 16-25 population. The implications for the role of the EP are discussed within Bronfenbrenner's (1979) eco-systemic framework.

### ***Microsystem:***

As noted earlier, the microsystem refers to individuals, groups or institutions which impact directly on the young person. For the purposes of this study, family, parent, peers, school and college have been included within the microsystem. The role of the EP within this system may be particularly to support parents during the period of transition. Findings in the literature have highlighted the need to support the parents and families with the transition and planning (Heslop et al., 2007; Raghavan, Pawson, & Small, 2013; Stewart et al., 2010). However, an OFSTED Report (2011) warned against professionals focussing their attention and skill set on vulnerable parents and overlooking the voice and the equally, if not more, vulnerable young person.

The mothers in the current study were cited as being very helpful to the young people; however, there were questions about how the young people were involved in their own decision making and parental anxieties featured very clearly for one young person. The role of the EP, therefore, may be to support mothers through the transition by promoting the voice of the young person and enabling mothers to relinquish some control over the young people in order to encourage them to develop a greater degree of autonomy, as was noted by two of the young people as being important to them.

The EP may also have a role in supporting the FE provision by providing college staff with a holistic understanding of the young person at the point of transition and/or by providing consultations with staff to problem solve or unpick difficulties young people may be experiencing in their initial experiences of college.

### ***Mesosystem:***

The mesosystem refers to the interconnections between the microsystems. In this study and considering the role of the EP, the connection between parents and the young people's peers, college and parents are considered. Three of the young people in the study reported losing contact with their peers in the transition to college and were upset by this. A possible role for the EP in relation to this is supporting parents prior to the transition to encourage them to consider ways to maintain important friendships between their young person and their peers after the transition.

The EP could also have a significant role to play in supporting the relationship between the FE provision and parents. In gaining parental consent, it

was mentioned by the manager of the specialist provision at the college that communication between the FE provision and home is less than it would be when the young person was at school. Reasons for this was because as a provision the FE college felt that the young people, whilst a vulnerable population, their aim was to treat these young people similarly to the mainstream population. This meant that the young people were in control of their own work and assignments and they were spoken to directly about decisions relating to them before engaging parents. The manager of the provision however acknowledged the benefits of having closer relationships with the young peoples' parents and, it is suggested, facilitating joint home-college consultations is a role the EP could undertake.

### ***Exosystem:***

The EP has a role to play in the young person's local context and the network around them. The exosystem provides the EP with an opportunity to engage in a multi-agency approach. The EP can contribute to conversations about the young person with a wide range of colleagues, for example with social workers in the Disabled Children's Teams or with career advisors in the Connexions team. For the EP to engage in this work, however, it is important that the EP is clear with other professionals what the role of the EP is and what should be expected of the EP, as noted in the Code of Conduct set out by the Division of Educational and Child Psychology (DECP, 2007). In order for this to happen the EP must first be clear about what their role is. In the current study, the young person's voice was elicited collaboratively, with the support of college staff and a speech and language therapist. The multi agency approach could also



be taken by the EP during the conversions of statements to Education, Health and Care Plans for young people moving to FE. The EP could provide a holistic understanding of the young people, including insight into the young person's abilities, promoting their strengths as well as acknowledging the young person's difficulties and promoting the viewpoint that the young person is more than the sum of their deficit or difficulty.

### ***Macrosystem:***

The macrosystem in this study refers to the cultural and political influences of the SEND Reforms (DfE, 2011) and SEND Code of Practice (DfE, 2014). The EP is directly affected by the SEND Reforms and SEND Code of Practice in that the role was expanded to include supporting the FE sector and an older population. The EP, therefore, has a potential role in feeding back into policy development. The EP is one of the professions best positioned to provide an overview of how the new legislation has been implemented and how it has affected young people and their families thus far. This would satisfy the emancipatory aim of the current research.

### ***The Young Person:***

As well as discussing a systemic role for the EP, it is also important that a direct role working with the young person is explored in this discussion. As discussed earlier, the distractibility of the young people could be considered to be a challenge to eliciting the viewpoint of the young people; however, as educational psychologists, we routinely work with young people who often find it difficult to engage with lessons or assessment tasks. EPs have a broad skill set,

which includes effective rapport building - an approach in the research shown to aide engagement during conversations with vulnerable populations (Cameron & Murphy, 2002; Loyd, 2012; McGarry & Lunt, 2006).

An understanding of how learning needs and attention and concentration difficulties of the young people with SLD can best be supported in gathering their views is an additional strength of the EP. In the interviews, I was asked to sing along to a song from the band Blur; asked whether I prefer Thai or Chinese food and why; asked out twice and complimented on my interviewing style - all of which were off topic responses to my questions; however, my experience as an EP helped to redirect the young people back on task. This was done by sensitive prompting and redirecting strategies during the interviews.

Fundamentally, the current research has demonstrated that young people with SLD, with appropriate support, are capable of expressing their feelings and opinions about their transition experience from school to FE, including factors which have helped and hindered. It is suggested that the role of the EP is to advocate for the young person and provide a holistic understanding of them, including their strengths and areas of needs, prior to and once they have transitioned into the FE setting. It is a person-centred approach, promotes understanding and awareness of the young person and treats them with dignity and respect.

## 6. CONCLUSION

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The findings from the present study were largely consistent with research that has been conducted previously with young people with less severe learning difficulties. For example, the young people's valuing of their parental and family support and the impact of peer relationships on their transition experience were consistent with previous research (Aston et al., 2005; Carroll & Dockrell, 2012). Making sense of college and feelings about college were consistent with previous research; as was the anxiety and upset of missing their old school. The challenging factor of tiredness however had not been addressed or uncovered in any previous studies and requires further consideration when thinking about the kinds of support young people with SLD may need when transitioning into a new environment.

The loss and separation from their peers, confusion as to where their peers were, was a strong theme to emerge from the young people's responses and this loss had not been supported or perhaps fully explained to the young people before, during or after the transition. As noted, one of the young people reported having her mother support her with maintaining contact with their peers from their old setting; but perhaps this role could be identified within the transition planning process. Also, it is suggested that the level of tiredness as expressed by the young people at the first interview is worthy of consideration when they start college; for example, the induction period may require a more staggered approach in the first few weeks of their college experience.

## YOUNG PEOPLE WITH SLD'S EXPERIENCE OF COLLEGE

The young people, Lydia, Matthew, Rema, Jordan and Lee all demonstrated their ability to share their thoughts and feelings coherently in this study and from this, factors identified with their initial experience was identified. Each young person was different and diverse and re-emphasised the limitations of grouping young people by ability and treating them in a homogenous fashion. Each of the young people's views, although similar, were expressed differently and their individual contexts were evident throughout both interviews.

Finally: reflecting on Bronfenbrenner's eco-systemic model (1979) and the young people as individuals, a conclusion reached by the researcher is that advocating for vulnerable young people - eliciting their voice and promoting a holistic viewpoint of their needs, thoughts and feelings - perhaps is the most appropriate use of EP skills and abilities.

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## APPENDIX A

## LITERATURE SEARCH

## Search terms and papers retrieved

SEARCH WORD	SEARCH DATE	PAPERS RETRIEVED	Peer REVIEWED	PAPER TITLES
YP with SLD, college	8/5/2015	0	0	
YP with severe learning difficulties, college	8/5/2015	0	0	
YP, severe learning difficulties, transition, college	8/5/2015	9	4	1. Heslop et al., 2007 2. Aston et al., 2005 3. Abbott and Heslop 2009 4. Kaehne & Beyer 2008
Views of YP , severe learning difficulties	8/5/2015	0	0	
YP, SLD, transition experience, college	8/5/2015	8	0	
YP, SLD, transition, college, perceptions	8/5/2015	4	0	
Transition experience, YP with SLD, college	8/5/2015	8	0	
Experience of YP, SLD, college	8/5/2015	16	1	1. Aston et al., 2005
Experience YP, SLD, transition	8/5/2015	13	3	1. Heslop et al., 2007 2. McConkey 2001, 3. Aston et al., 2005
Perpectives of, YP, SLD, Transition	8/5/2015	7	3	

# YOUNG PEOPLE WITH SLD'S EXPERIENCE OF COLLEGE

<b>Learning difficulties, experiences of transition to college</b>	8/5/2015	31	14	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Carroll (2014)</li> <li>2. Palikara et al.,</li> <li>3. Carroll &amp; Dockrell, 2012</li> <li>4. Cullen, Lindsay and Dockrell, 2009</li> <li>5. Heslop et al., 2007</li> <li>6. Abbott &amp; Heslop 2009</li> <li>7. Aston et al., 2005</li> <li>8. Carnaby et al., 2003</li> <li>9. Kaehne &amp; Beyer 2008</li> <li>10. Evans et al., 2012</li> <li>11. Ward et al., 2003</li> <li>12. Whitehouse et al., 2009</li> <li>13. McConkey 2001</li> <li>14. Caton and Kagan, 2007</li> </ol>
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## **APPENDIX B**

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CONSENT FORM FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

INFORMATION SHEET FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

CONSENT FORM FOR PARENTS

INFORMATION SHEET FOR FE AND PARENTS

## Consent Form



I am Siobhan Hickey. I am a Trainee Psychologist  
at the Institute of Education.

I want to FIND OUT what  
happened when you left school.



I would like to TALK to you about  
you leaving school.

You can say YES or NO to talking to me.

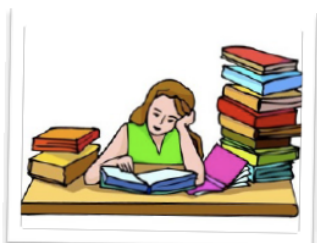


You can SPEAK to your PARENTS or  
your TEACHERS if you don't know if  
you would like to talk to me.

# Information Sheet



My **NAME** is Siobhan Hickey.



I am **STUDYING** at the Institute of Education



I want to **TALK** to young people



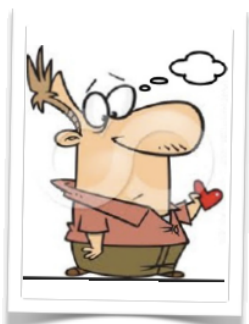
in **SEPTEMBER**



About **LEAVING** school



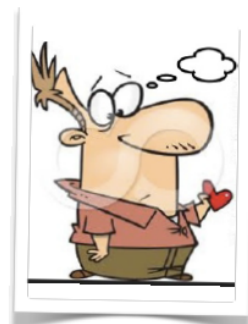
and **GOING TO** college.



I will ask **HOW YOU FEEL** about college. I will ask you what has **CHANGED** since school.



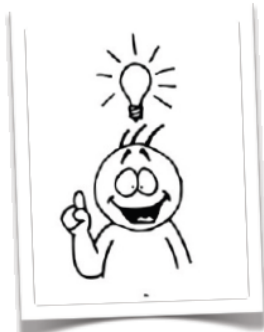
I want to ask **QUESTIONS** about



what you **THINK** and what you **FEEL**.



# Information Sheet



To help psychologists  
**UNDERSTAND** how it feels to  
leave school and go to college.



When we talk it will be **1 TO 1**.  
This means only **YOU** and **ME** in  
the room



We will talk for **1 HOUR**.



In **SEPTEMBER**



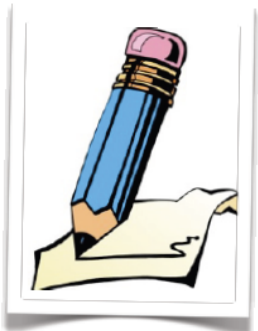
And we will talk **AGAIN** for **1  
HOUR**



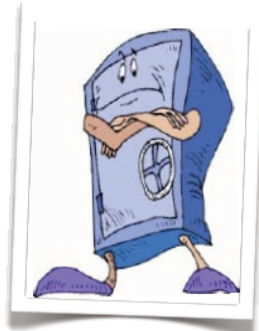
In **NOVEMBER**.



I will **RECORD** us talking so I can  
**LISTEN** to it again

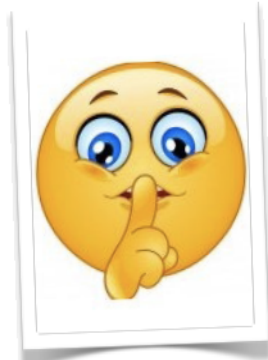


I will **WRITE** down what we say

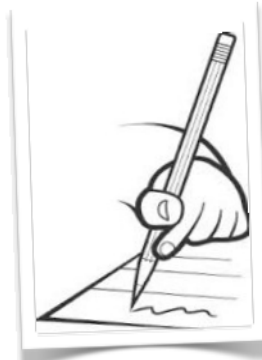


And I will keep the recording  
and what I write in a **SAFE  
PLACE**.

# Information Sheet



What we talk about is **PRIVATE**.  
This means I **WILL TELL** people  
**WHAT** we talked about but I  
**WON'T TELL** people your **NAME**.



I will **WRITE** a report about  
what people have told me



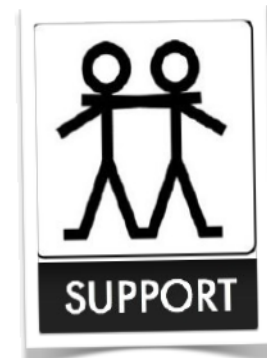
I might use **YOUR WORDS** but I  
**WON'T** use **YOUR NAME**.



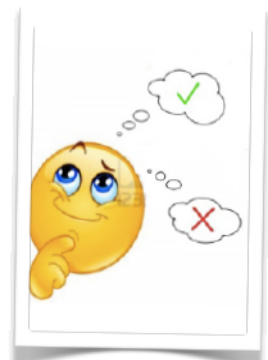
I will **SHOW** this report to  
psychologists.



This will help them to  
**UNDERSTAND** what it's like to  
leave school and go to college.



This will help to **SUPPORT** other  
people.



You can choose to say **YES** or **NO**  
to talking to me.



You can change you mind and  
**STOP** if you want to.



You can **LEAVE** whenever you  
want to.



Leading education  
and social research  
Institute of Education  
University of London

## **The subjective experiences of young people with severe learning difficulties transitioning from post-16 provision to FE**

### **The Researcher:**

My name is Siobhan Hickey. I am conducting a research project as part of my Doctorate in Educational Psychology training. I am being supervised by Dr Dawn Male.

### **The Research:**

The purpose of the study is to gain insight into the experiences of your son or daughter after they have moved from post-16 provision into further education. The study's findings will be beneficial for the young people involved as it will promote their voice and the voice of those with severe learning difficulties within educational literature. It will highlight what the young people themselves have found challenging and supportive during the transition process and will provide other professionals with firsthand experiences of what assists a positive transition into early adulthood. Under the new SEND Code of Practice 2014, your son or daughter are also the first young people to move to FE without having to move into adult services and will have their needs met by children and education services until their 25<sup>th</sup> birthday.

### **The Process:**

Your son or daughter's participation in the study will involve two one hour long interviews, once in September and again in November after the half-term. The interviews can take place at their FE provision or at home if that is preferable. Notes will be taken during the interview and the interview will also be tape recorded for later analysis.

### **Risk:**

The study will pose no risk to you or your child. The research has been reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee at The Institute of Education, University of London. Confidentiality will be maintained and the

anonymity of individuals will be protected by not citing any names within the study or any written reports. I will not share your son or daughter's responses with anyone other than my supervisor. If at any time, your son or daughter does not want to continue participating, they have the right to fully withdraw from the study and request that any responses collected from them not be used in the study. All of this information will be fully explained to them in the information sheets and again before the interviews begin.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact me at:  
[shickey@ioe.ac.uk](mailto:shickey@ioe.ac.uk)

Parent's Name (Please Print)

Name of your son or daughter

Parent's Signature

Date



**Brief Synopsis of the Research being conducted:**

**Project Title:**

The subjective experiences of young people with severe learning difficulties transitioning from post-16 provision to further education (FE).

**Rationale for research:**

The purpose of the research is to understand the transition experience of young people with severe learning difficulties moving into FE and adult life. It will explore their experience of the transition process; how they felt about the transition, the impact of the transition has had, their current life situation and the sense they have made of the transition process. Their perspectives on the support they received during the transition process will also be studied. Despite research and commentary around the impact of transition and the need to obtain the perspectives of young people with SLD, there appears to be few published or peer reviewed accounts of this sort of data. Research into the self-concept of young people with learning difficulties has been sparse and this is even more limited in the area of research into the views of students with SLD. Recent research findings have concluded that studies involving those with SLD are vital in relation to progressing the area of expectations for this group of learners. This current research project looks to add to the little research already undertaken in this field and to actively promote the voice of the SLD population.

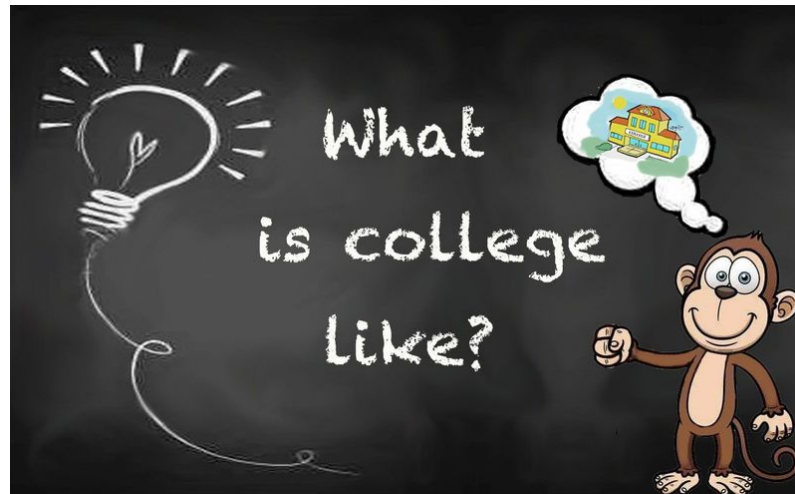
The population being researched will be the first to experience the transition from post-school provision under the new Education, Health and Care plans. Research looking specifically at the transition of this population under this new government initiative has not been done before. For adolescents with SLD, who are undergoing an extended period of transition from school to post-school provision, the ability to advocate for themselves may be considered to be of vital importance. Therefore, the impact of the change in provision, personnel and perceptions of new experiences in the post school environment needs to be better explored. The subjective experience of transition into FE and adulthood has not been explored specifically with those with severe learning difficulties. It is a real opportunity to begin conceptualising this particular experience from subjective accounts. The population I am researching will be the first to experience the transition from post-school provision under the new EHC plans.

Thank you for taking the time to read this.

Best Wishes,  
Siobhan Hickey

## APPENDIX C

### EXAMPLES OF THE COMPUTER BASED PROMPTS USED IN THE INTERVIEW



**Interview Schedule:**

1. Where did you go to school before coming to college?
2. Do you know why you came here? Prompt: Why did you come to college?
3. Did you know anything about college? Prompt: What did you know?
4. Did you visit college? Prompts: Can you remember when, with who?
5. Can you remember your first day? Prompt: Can you tell me about your first day here at college?
6. Is college the same OR different to school? Prompt: What is the same?  
What is different?
7. What do you like about college? Prompt: what is good about college?
8. What do you not like about college? Prompt: What is not good about college?
9. Are there people who help you at college? Prompt: Who helps you? Can you tell me about how they help you? What do they do?
10. Did you know anyone here at college before you started here?
11. Have you got friends at college? Prompt: Who are your friends at college?
12. What is your favourite thing about college?
13. Is there anything you would like to tell me about college?

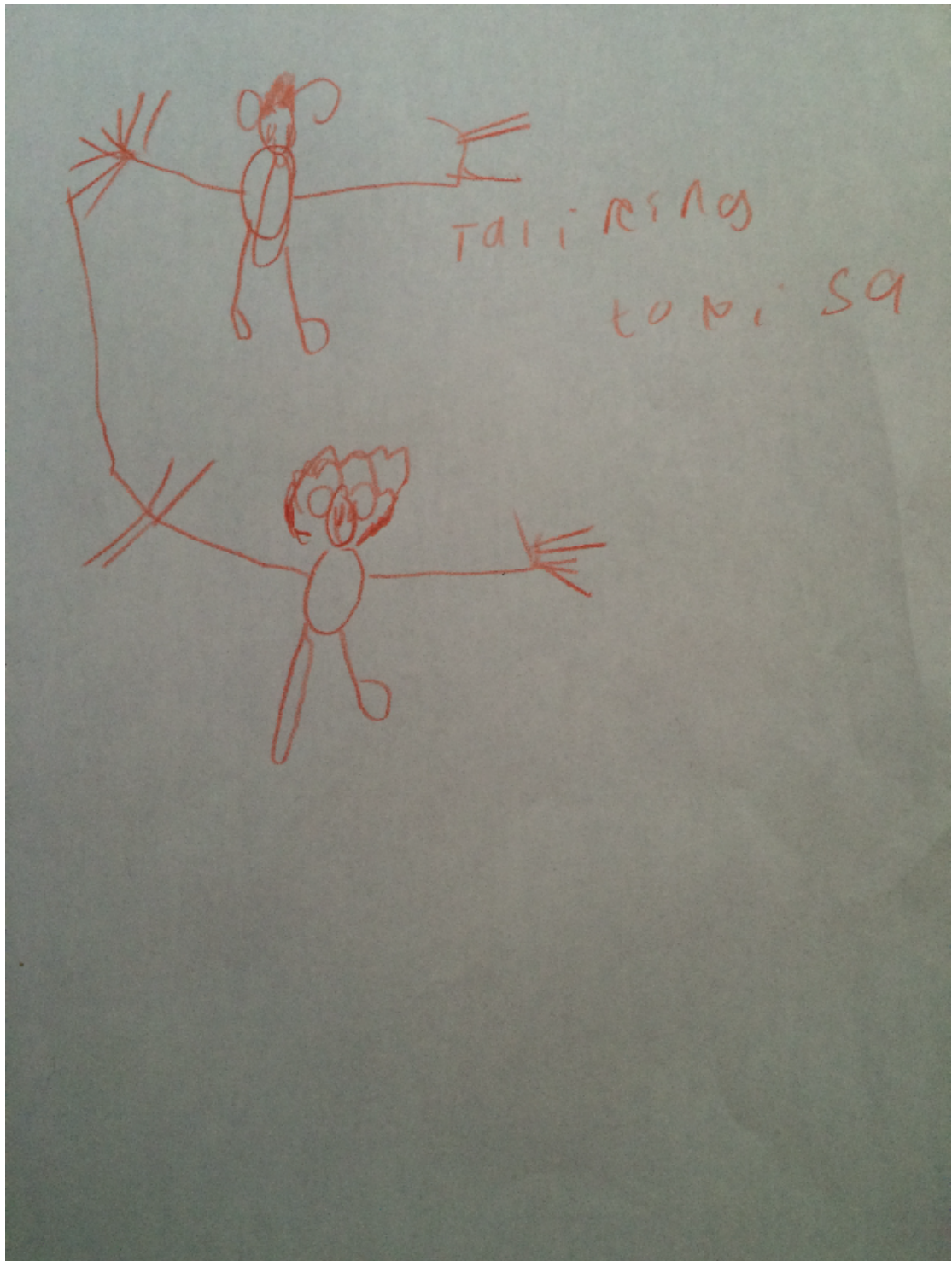
## APPENDIX D

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DRAWINGS BY THE YOUNG PEOPLE OF THEMSELVES AT COLLEGE



YOUNG PEOPLE WITH SLD'S EXPERIENCE OF COLLEGE



## YOUNG PEOPLE WITH SLD'S EXPERIENCE OF COLLEGE



## APPENDIX E

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EXTRACT OF A TRANSCRIPT WITH INITIAL CODES HIGHLIGHTED

COPY OF INITIAL THEMATIC MAPS



# YOUNG PEOPLE WITH SLD'S EXPERIENCE OF COLLEGE

211 **Yeah, I want to know.**  
 212 Because you're nice. —  
 213 **Ok.**  
 214 You're lovely. You're doing well asking all these questions and everyone will like you. —  
 215 **I'm doing alright aren't I? Very good (laughs). Can I ask what do you not like**  
 216 **about college?**  
 217 Nothing really. *satisfied w/ college*  
 218 **Nothing really?**  
 219 No —  
 220 **Out of 10, what would you give college?**  
 221 Everything is good and I'm loving it. *Positive feelings about college*  
 222 **Ok. You're loving it. That's great, that's really good.**  
 223 It's new... and I love it. *New opportunity*  
 224 **And you like it. Cool. What do you think about the classroom? Do you like the**  
 225 **classroom?**  
 226 It's big. *classroom layout*  
 227 **It's big. Ok.**  
 228 There's a lot of chairs and enough for people *classroom layout*  
 229 **And that's good.**  
 230 More able to (inaudible)  
 231 **Ok.**  
 232 We get drinks in the morning. *Routine*  
 233 **I see.**  
 234 (inaudible) in the morning and then lunch in the day. *Routine*  
 235 **Ok.**  
 236 And I go to the canteen to see my friends. *Social aspect of college*  
 237 **So you come in on the Monday morning. Ok? Tell me what happens when you**  
 238 **come in here?**  
 239 I come in here. *Routine*  
 240 **Yeah.**  
 241 So first I come in here... *Routine*  
 242 **Yeah.**  
 243 To play the drums. *Enjoyable activity @ college*  
 244 **I see, very good.**  
 245 At lunch time I play drums. *activity @ college*

3

Oh I see and that's how you settled in?  
 And that helped me a lot. *support source of help.*  
 I see. How did that help?  
 Umm... it helped a lot. *so aware of support*  
 It helped a lot. Did it make you feel better, less scared?  
 Yes it made me happy. *feeling about college*  
 Cool, that's very nice to hear. So you've settled in nicely.  
 Yes. *aff*  
 And everybody was friendly?  
 Yes. *aff*  
 I see, I see. So next page. Look you've answered that one for me. How do you feel about college?  
 I'm 19 now. *age - adulthood*  
 You're 19 now.  
 And next year I'll be 20. *age - adulthood*  
 You'll be 20.  
 And then the next year (inaudible)  
 I see. Can I ask between your old school and this school, what's the same?  
 I miss my old school now. I still miss it here. *miss my old school*  
 Why are you missing it?  
 Because my friends are over there and all my teachers are over there. *missing friends*  
 Oh I see. *great*  
 And I don't get to see them. *missing friends*  
 And you miss your friends? *miss*  
 I miss my friends and my teachers *Reason loss*  
 I see. And you don't get to see them anymore?  
 And I don't get to see them anymore. On Friday I went over to the school, to see people and my teachers. *Planning connect*  
 I see, I see. And so have you made new friends here?  
 Yes. *aff*  
 Because you have said that you miss your friends from your old school. But you've made new friends here?  
 Yes. *aff*  
 And how did you make new friends here?  
 I've got Rema, em, (inaudible) Jordan, Paris. *friends @ college.*



# YOUNG PEOPLE WITH SLD'S EXPERIENCE OF COLLEGE

4

106 You've got four friends. *friends made @ college*

107 Jose *friends name*

108 And Jose as well? **And how did you make friends with them?**

109 Because I know them long Because you see Jose lives by me. *familiar 4p @ college*

110 **Oh, I see. So did that made it easier coming here?**

111 Yes I knew people here but also different people here. *familiar 7p + 10p for unfam*

112 **Oh I see. So what's different about here in college? I know the teachers are**

113 **different. You've got some new friends. What else is different?**

114 The school's alright. *feeling about school*

115 **Ok. School's alright.**

116 But college is fine. *feeling about college*

117 **College is fine. Is college better than school?**

118 College is much better than school. *comparisons about school + college*

119 **Why?**

120 Because everyone is nice to me. *feeling welcome (welcomed)*

121 **Everyone is nice to you. I see, anything else? What else makes it better?**

122 What? *a*

123 **What else makes it better?**

124 What else? *a*

125 **Oh, what else makes it better than school?**

126 College/Schools better because, because my friends have came and (inaudible) he said

127 he misses me... *missing friend reason for liking college*

128 **Yeah? He misses you. Ok.**

129 So when I left school and I come here...Linda said I can come visit him because he

130 misses me *desire to see missing friend*

131 **I see, I see.**

132 He misses me and I miss him. *lost friendship*

133 **I see.**

134 When I go to school I see him and my friends at school. [yawn] *keeping connected*

135 **I see, I see. But otherwise things are good here.**

136 Yeah.

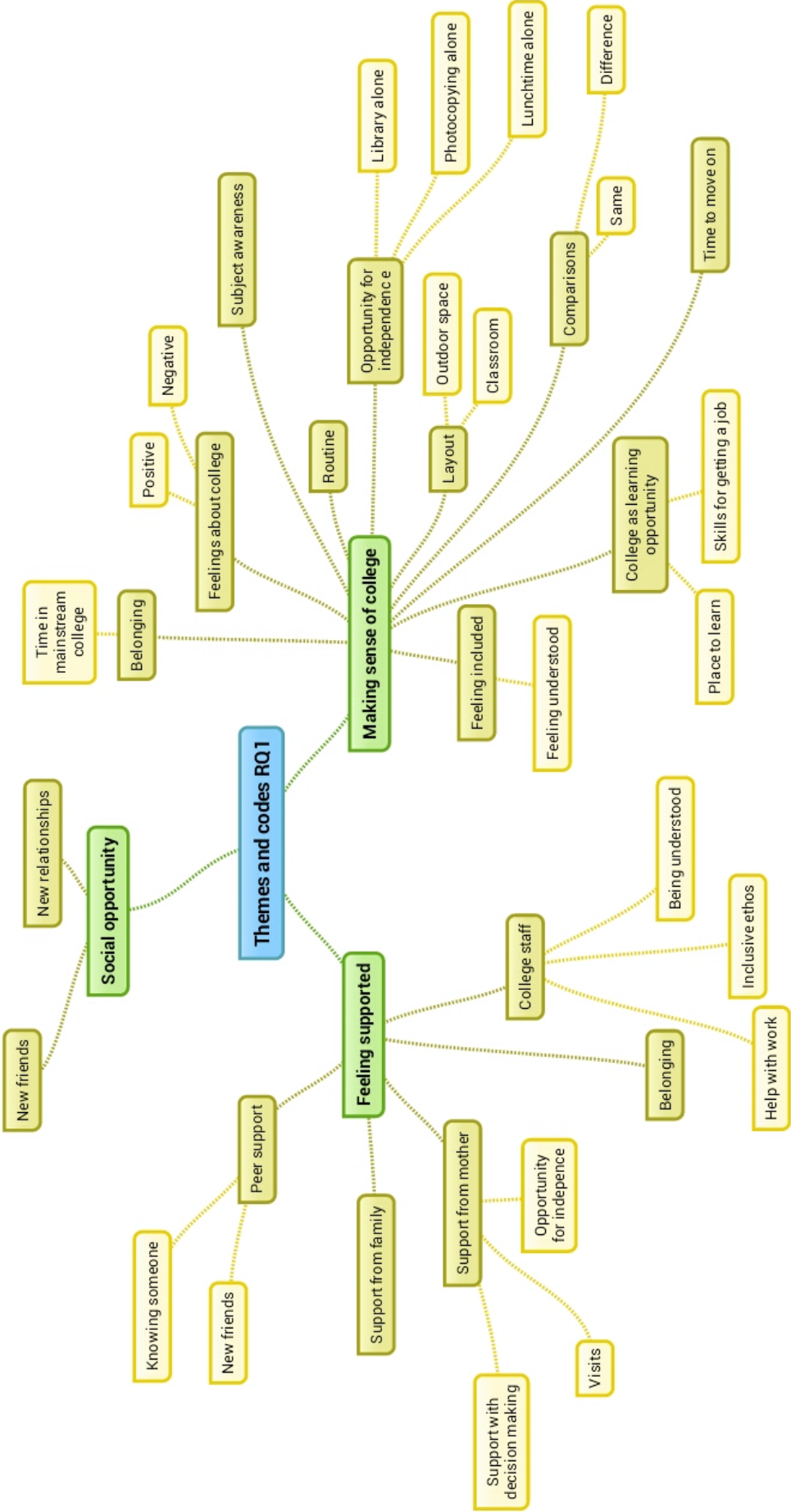
137 **Excellent. Excellent. Is there anything you find difficult here?**

138 Nope.

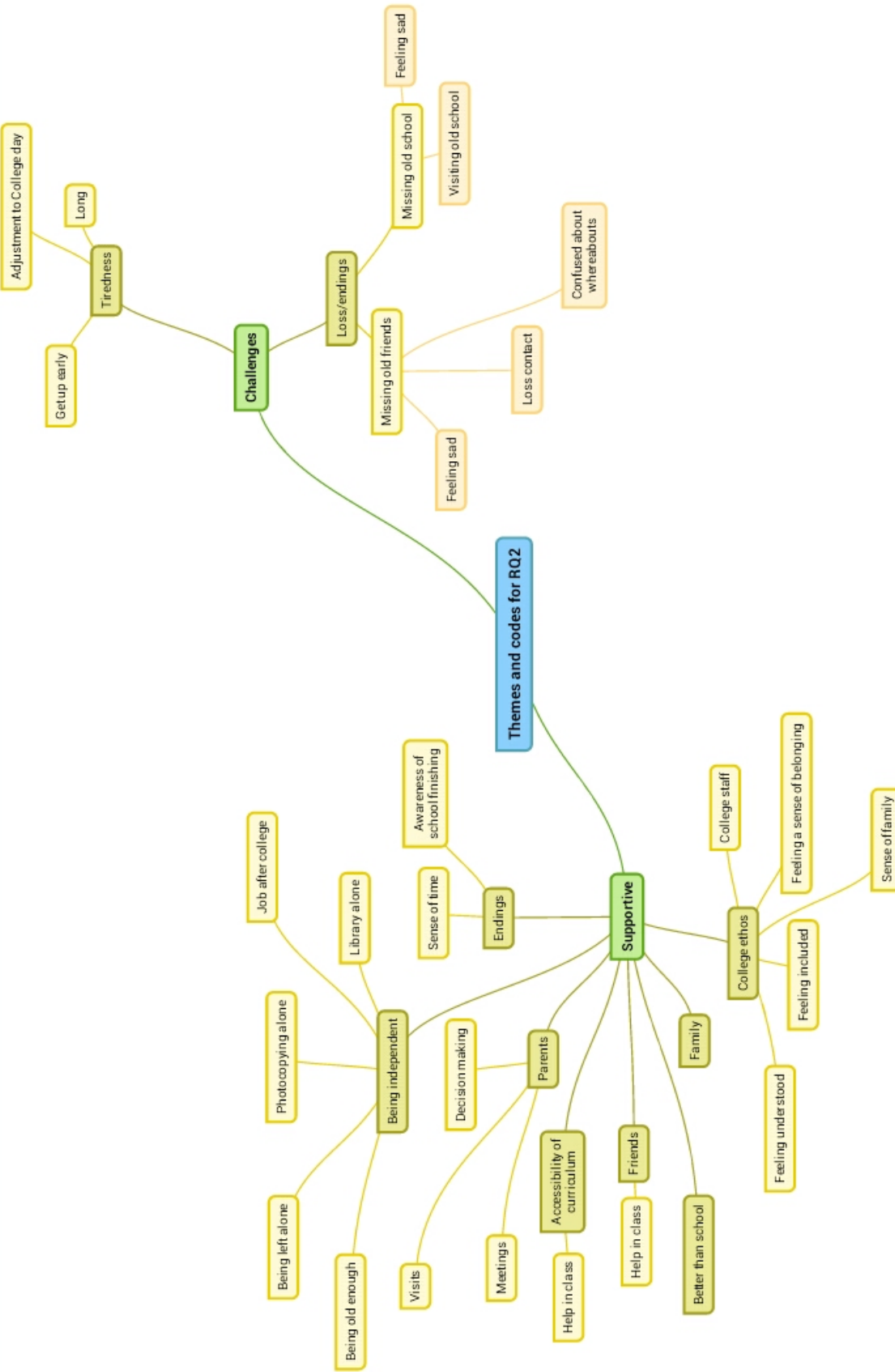
139 **No?**

140 It's good.

YOUNG PEOPLE WITH SLD'S EXPERIENCE OF COLLEGE



YOUNG PEOPLE WITH SLD'S EXPERIENCE OF COLLEGE





## APPENDIX F

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### COPY OF ETHICAL APPROVAL

Lorraine Fernandes <L.Fernandes@ioe.ac.uk> Thu 13/03/2014 13:55

Inbox

To:

Siobhan Hickey;

...

Cc:

Dawn Male;

Frances Oi Kiu Lee;

...

This message was sent with High importance.

Dear Siobhan

I am pleased to inform you that your research project "**The perspectives of the process of transition from school to post-school provision of young people with severe learning difficulties: New EHC plans and implications for educational psychologists**", for the Doctorate in Professional Educational, child and Adolescent Psychology, has been given ethical approval. If you have any further queries in this regard, please refer the enquirer to your supervisor. Please note, if your proposed study and methodology changes markedly from what you have outlined in your ethics review application you may need to complete and submit a new or revised application. Should this possibility arise, please discuss with your supervisors in the first instance before you proceed with a new/revised application.

**Please could you forward me soft copies of your ethics form with any supplementary attachments so that I can upload it to the IOE database?**

Thank you!

Good luck with your data collection.

Best wishes

Lorraine

Lorraine Fernandes

Programme Administrator

Doctorate in Professional Educational, Child and Adolescent Psychology

Psychology & Human Development

Institute of Education

25 Woburn Square

London WC1H 0AA

\*\*\*\*\*

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